



10

NOVEL

Reincarnated as a sword

WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka

ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo





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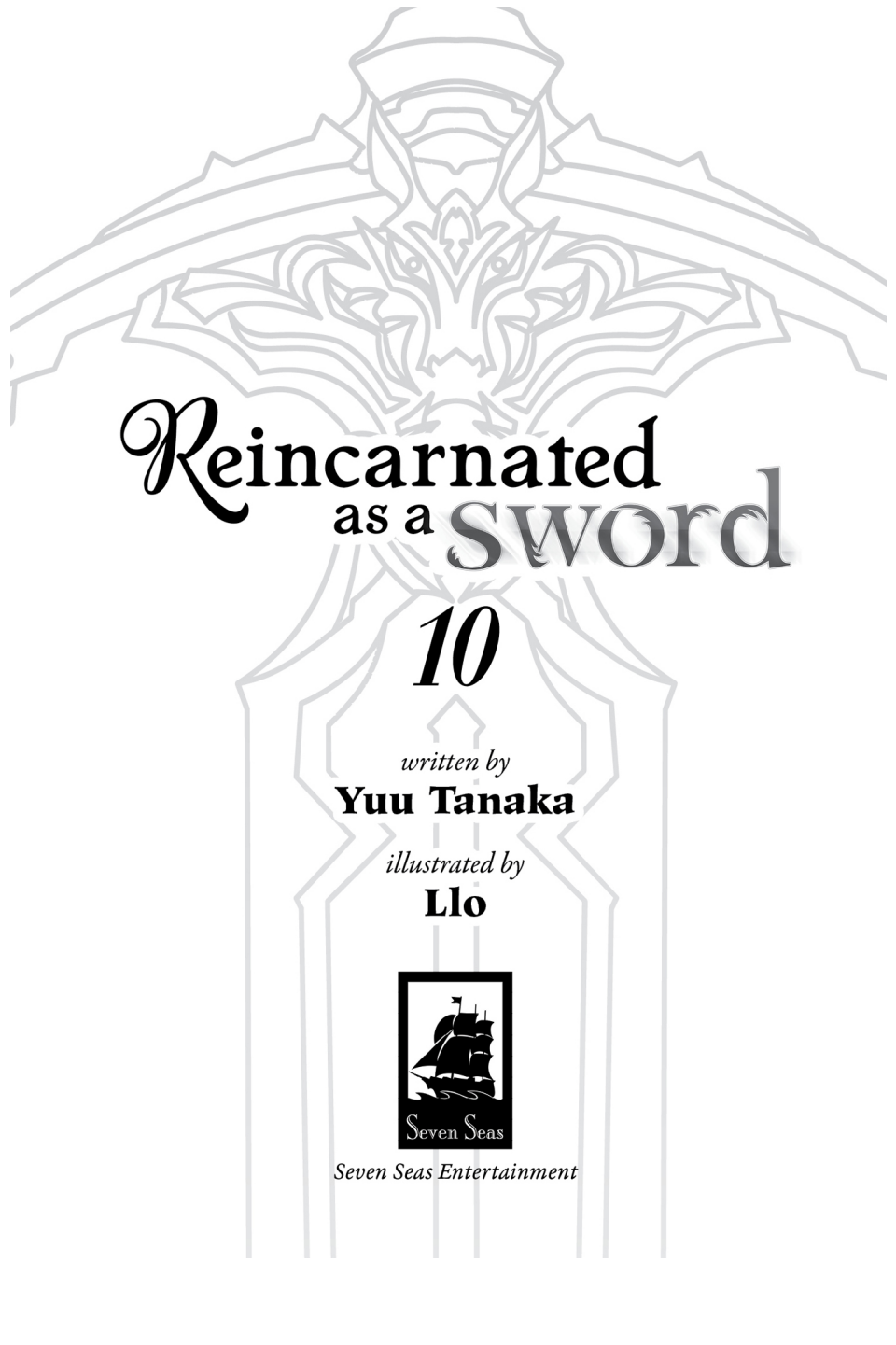
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as a **Sword** 10









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10

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

Llo



Seven Seas Entertainment

Tensei Shitara Ken Deshita Vol. 10
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MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
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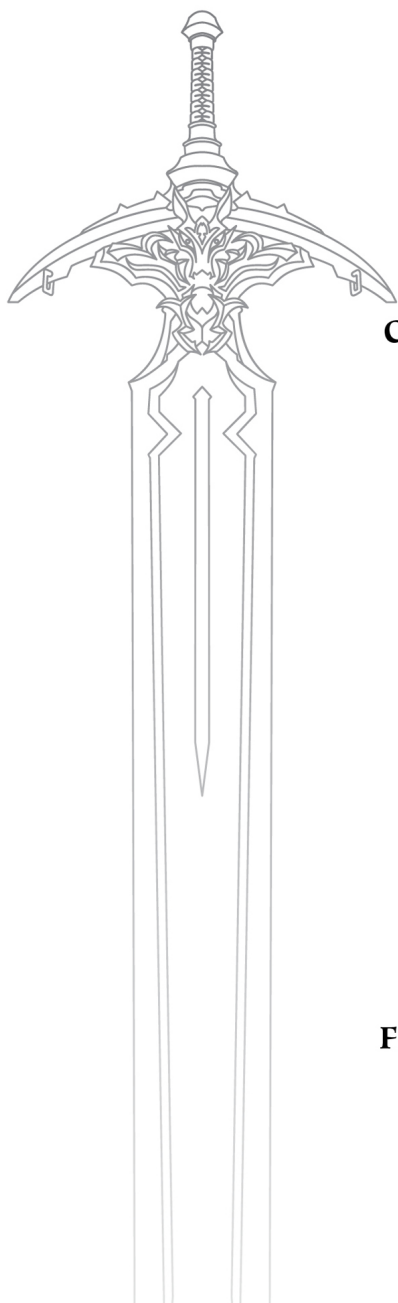
Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-468-8
Printed in Canada
First Printing: March 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter 1: Godsmith Mansion

Side

MY BODY WAS falling apart. My fingertips crumbled like sand, and my regenerative abilities couldn't help.

"Impossible..."

It was unthinkable. Had Lady Murelia really been defeated...?

And yet my current state *proved* that someone had destroyed the dungeon core.

"To think it would come to this..."

I'd been tasked to gather Fiends from outside the dungeon, and so I was in the northern part of the Beastman Nation—conquering one company of Fiends after another. Most of them were goblins, but there were wild orcs and minotaurs among them too. I had gathered a force of a thousand strong, and was ready to accomplish my mission by storming the capital...

"So...this is the end..."

Now that my master was gone, nothing I did had any meaning. Even if I conquered the capital, it would all be for naught.

"No...not yet!"

It was true that there was nothing more I could do. I had lost my master and my home, and I was utterly defeated. But did that mean I should let things end this way?

Absolutely not!

"If nothing else...!"

I could make the Beastman Nation suffer! Those animals must be drunk on their victory, pleased that Lady Murelia was dead. The least I could do was give them a wake-up call. Conquering the capital might be a pipe dream now, but I would not be forgotten! I would wreak so much havoc that those hateful animals would *have to* remember us. And

remember Lady Murelia! Their vile blood would water the fields, while their cities swam with terror.

“You will do...”

“Gyaga?”

I stabbed the goblin behind me with my spear.

“Gyaaa...urg...”

The pain would only last a moment. You are receiving my power, Goblin Necromancer. This Fiendstone spear was given to me by Lady Murelia herself, as a token of her trust. You are honored by such power.

The goblin’s skin turned night-black.

“Giii...”

It looked afraid of the rapid changes to its body, but that fear wouldn’t last long either. Soon, the Fiendstone would overwrite whatever ego it had left. It was the price of the Evil One’s power, and quite a cheap one, if I did say so myself.

“Gyaga...gya...gagagagaaaa!”

Good! Cry! For you have been reborn! Now you shall wreak destruction, servant of the Evil One! Destroy that filth!

The Goblin Necromancer grew larger, its tentacles seizing hold of the Fiends around it. They tried to escape, but it was pointless. Ultimately, they were absorbed.

Excellent. Cannibalize your allies. Become stronger! Cry havoc and destruction!

“Kuha ha ha...! Death to the filthy animals!”

I was broken and battered after the fierce battle, but Aristeia, who claimed to be a Godsmith, had agreed to help. Mea, the princess of the Beastman Nation, vouched for her identity and, if that weren’t enough, Aristeia had already performed some emergency maintenance and saved me from the scrapheap.

Now we were on our way to Aristeia’s mansion to conduct more thorough repairs. Her golem carriage carried us, along with Urslars,

toward her house—to the east of the dungeon where we'd fought Murelia.

“Let's have a chat, shall we?” Aristeia asked, looking at us.

She was the picture of a fair maiden, with her silver hair and red-and-white toga, but her speech had a rough, masculine tone. I'd only just met her and still wasn't used to the contradiction, but Fran didn't seem to notice.



“Shouldn’t someone be driving?” Fran asked.

She was, however, concerned about the driver. Or rather, the lack thereof. The golem horses ran without anyone to guide them, and I was quite worried that monsters might attack us.

“It’ll be all right,” said Aristeia. “The golems know the route, and the carriage is protected by a powerful barrier that repels monsters.”

Well, if a Godsmith said it would be fine, then we’d have to take her word for it. This carriage was probably equipped with spells and manatech far beyond our reckoning. Besides, Jet was running alongside the carriage, and could take care of any enemies that popped up.

“I would like to talk about Teacher,” said Aristeia. “If you don’t mind.”

“Hm...”

Fran nodded, but cast a glance at Urslars. The S-Rank adventurer wielded the Godsword Gaia and was notorious for going berserk and destroying everything in his path. He was currently lying unconscious on the floor, probably because I’d forced him out of his berserk state with Skill Taker.

Still, he could wake up at any time, and things would get more complicated if he overheard this conversation. Aristeia seemed to understand, because she took a strange device out of her item pouch. It looked like a brown strip about a meter long.

“This allows anyone who’s touching it to use Telepathy. It is incomplete, and only has a small effective range, but it is very handy for people with secrets to share.”

Aristeia scooted over to Fran’s side, and Fran wrapped one end of the strip around my hilt. She and Aristeia both reached out to touch it. There was barely enough of it to go around. You had to be in really close quarters to use it.

Well? Aristeia asked. *Can you hear me?*

Hm, said Fran.

I can hear you, I told her carefully.

Ever since the battle, it hurt to use Telepathy. I couldn’t even talk to Fran without straining myself. But despite some initial awkwardness, it wasn’t painful to use this strip. That meant I should be able to hold an

actual conversation. I was surprised that it had any effect on my sword body. I guess Aristeia really was a Godsmith.

Let me start with Teacher, she said. I would like to know who made you, and when.

All right.

I answered her questions as honestly as I could. After all, I wanted to be fixed, and she might be the only person who could help me, so it didn't make sense to lie. Besides, she might know something about me that I didn't.

That said, I had no idea who my maker was, so I couldn't tell her much. Still, Aristeia looked surprised.

I see, she said. You used to be human, I take it?

Uh, you can tell?

I hadn't even got to that part yet, but she had me figured out. How? Could a Godsmith's Identify see that I was human?

Kind of, she said. I've made artificial souls before, but none that can talk as well as you. The fact that I saw something resembling a soul within you confirms you aren't man-made.

Much like Jean the necromancer, Aristeia possessed a Unique Skill that allowed her to see souls. Apparently, they came in all shapes and sizes, although I had no way of knowing for sure.

You have the soul of a human, she said, watching me closely. And you answered my questions in a very human manner. I assumed you were humanoid, but this makes more sense. Although that raises more questions than it answers.

Like what? I asked.

I don't know of any technique that can seal a human soul inside a weapon. I am a Godsmith, and yet I couldn't even begin to guess how you were forged.

I guess that was a pretty reasonable thing to wonder about. Who put me into this sword? Was it the same person who forged me?

I'll analyze you more thoroughly at my mansion, said Aristeia. We might get some answers there. Then we can begin to form a hypothesis. Oh, I can't wait.

She studied me with the eyes of a craftsman, like a child who'd

been given a new toy. It was quite terrifying.

I would like to ask Fran some questions now, she said. Is that all right?

Oh, sure. She definitely remembers everything we've been through.

...

Uh, Fran?

"Zzz..."

She must have fallen asleep at some point. She looked so peaceful. I guess she must be exhausted from crying—although she looked fine, she was still reeling from the shock of Kiara's death. She must've been staying up through sheer force of will. When Aristeia agreed to repair me, the relief sent her straight off to sleep.

I'll talk to her another time, said Aristeia.

Sorry about that. I'll answer any questions you might have.

It's all right. Sleeping is a child's job. Let's start from when you two met.

And so, I told her our whole story.

She was shocked to hear how Fran and I met. Although, to be honest, I thought it was a silly coincidence too. I explained how we journeyed together, growing stronger with every town, sea, and dungeon we crossed. Aristeia wasn't as interested in our adventures, but she definitely wanted to know how I grew more powerful. She had a lively curiosity, but also something of a one-track mind.

Eventually, I reached our fight with the Valkyrie. It was here that I began to experience some strange sensations.

Using skills started to hurt, I explained.

A sword can feel pain? Interesting. Does it hurt every time?

No. Usually only when I try to multicast or go crazy with transmutation.

I wasn't even sure if I'd classify it as pain. After all, I didn't have any pain receptors. Still, it was the closest thing to how it felt.

We'll have to look into what you're made of, she said. I've never seen a sword complain of pain before. Regardless, there is a chance that it is affecting you quite deeply. In the future, try to avoid doing anything that

hurts.

All right.

I carried on the conversation through the telepathy strip, talking in Fran's stead. I told Aristeia everything from when we defeated the Fiend army, up to the point when we met her. Then I explained as much as I could about my skills, although I couldn't quite remember where and when I got them all. Fortunately, I was able to answer her questions.

I explained the sensation I felt when I absorbed a crystal, and the leftover desires I had from when I was still human. I also talked about how different it was to use a skill as a sword rather than a person.

The crystal subject piqued Aristeia's interest, and she asked about their differing values. Did she need to know that to repair me, or was she just satisfying her curiosity? Either way, I explained that the powerful monsters yielded the biggest crystals, while Fiends offered considerably less.

After that, I started explaining my skill leveling. Aristeia had never heard of the point system before.

For every answer you give, ten questions spring from it, she said.

I'll take that as a compliment, Godsmith.

So you should. The Godswords may be more powerful than you, but I've never come across a more mysterious weapon.

I'd finally found a legendary blacksmith to examine me. Now, I was just filled with even more questions about who made me, and why.

Two hours later, I'd answered all of Aristeia's questions, and the carriage came to a halt.

"Looks like we're here," she said. "My, how the time flies! That was a very productive conversation. Come on, Fran. Wake up!"

"Urgh..."

She shook Fran awake. I expected her to be rough, but she was very gentle with her. I guess she was still a maiden beneath that gruff exterior after all.

"Up and at 'em, Stupid Ogre!"

Or maybe not.

While Fran rubbed her sleepy eyes, Aristeia kicked Urslars in the head. Looked like there was no mercy for him! I know the Ogrekin wasn't injured, but he was still exhausted from going berserk. Besides, a kick to the head always hurt, even if you *were* a two-meter block of muscle.

Still, Aristeia kept going. On the fifth kick or so, Urslars finally woke up.

"Bwuh? Where am I...?"

"Took you long enough."

"Aristeia... Oh, no!" When he saw who he was with, Urslars let out a pathetic yelp. "Wh-why are you here?"

"I sensed the energy of a Godsword. Two of them, in fact. So I came down to investigate. I was worried that the wielders were fighting to the death."

Godsmiths could sense that kind of mana. If there was a fight, then she'd want to stop it, right?

"If a Godsword was broken, that would be a golden opportunity to repair it!"

Apparently, she just *really* wanted to work on a Godsword.

"On your feet now!" she said. "Get out of the way!"

"R-right."

Urslars rolled out of the carriage, and Aristeia and Fran followed.

Aristeia's mansion stood amongst the trees, looking somewhat out of place. It was made from stone, but there wasn't a single seam in its four walls. The façade was completely unblemished, polished to a mirror sheen. Each wall was a twenty-five-meter-long white marble slab, arranged to form a box. Even the roof was made from it.

The only sign that it was a house at all were the small, regular windows. Without those, I would have assumed it was an abandoned ruin, or some kind of magical catalyst. From the two rows of windows, I assumed it had two stories.

"So," said Aristeia. "Quite a mansion, isn't it?"

"It's as huge as it is horribly bright," said Urslars. "I still can't

believe you figured out a way to make it move.”

Apparently, it had manatech that made it capable of movement. A fitting abode for a Godsmith.

“Hmph. This house is perfectly proportioned,” said Aristeia, glaring at him. “Unlike your body, which is too large for your head.”

“Ugh...”

Looked like she didn’t appreciate his comments about her house. Urslars flinched, but didn’t press the issue. He seemed pretty uncomfortable around her. Did they have some kind of history?

“Over here.”

The Godsmith stowed the carriage in her item pouch and guided us in. The mansion was even more fantastical inside.

“Welcome to my atelier.”

We walked into the mansion and immediately found ourselves in a workshop. For all I knew, the whole place was one giant workroom. Although I couldn’t tell which room served what purpose at first glance.

The walls gleamed like polished silverware. It wasn’t magic—they were plated with some kind of metal, brilliantly reflecting the light coming from the bulb on the ceiling.

Four bed-sized slates sat in the center of the room, and all of them seemed to be made of the same metal as the walls. They were reminiscent of the tables in a laboratory, with ample space between each one. And that was really all there was. There wasn’t even any other furniture or cleaning equipment. Although, when I took a closer look at the walls, I noticed a neat line of drawers. They were hard to spot in the reflection coming off the metal, and almost looked like an optical illusion.

“Wow.”

Fran squinted against the light, admiring the walls and the ceiling.

“They’re plated with mithril,” Aristeia explained. “Excellent for blocking mana, and necessary when I work on mana-sensitive projects.”

“Mithril?” Fran asked. “All of it?”

“Yep.”

It was unusual to see Fran so surprised. Even if the walls were just

plated, that was still a *lot* of mithril. I guess the Godsmith had a godly budget.

“You won’t last long around here if you don’t get used to seeing shocking things,” said Urslars.

“Shut up, you dumb Ogre. Go upstairs. You know where the guest room is, and I have something important to discuss with Fran.”

“All right,” Urslars agreed. “Although I hope that someone will explain what happened back there at some point.”

“How much do you remember?” Fran asked.

Urslars scratched his chin, dredging his memories.

“Let’s see... The princess told me that you pulled me out of Mad Ogre by taking the skill away. I passed out immediately. The next thing I knew, I was in Aristeia’s carriage. I remember something about fighting off that Fiend bastard, but...”

Mea really had skimped on the details of what happened after he came out of Mad Ogre Form. He must have lost consciousness soon after I started fighting Theraclede.

“I haven’t felt this good in a long time,” he said, bowing his head deeply. “Thank you for taking that godforsaken skill away from me.”

He sounded deeply grateful, from the bottom of his heart.

“But you said it will come back?” Fran asked.

Urslars was a Dark Ogre. Even if we used Skill Taker, it would come back. Class Skills were carved into your soul. At best, he had a few days of reprieve.

“Even so,” he said. “It’s nice not to be afraid of myself for once. I owe you, big time.”

“If I hadn’t done it,” Fran said. “Things would have been worse.”

“Yes, I should thank you for stopping me from killing the princess. And Kiara. I’ll have to apologize to them when we next meet.”

“...”

Of course. Urslars didn’t know Kiara was dead. And Fran couldn’t bring herself to tell him. She frowned and turned away.

“...”

“What?”

“Off with you, you dumb ogre...! I’ll tell you about Kiara’s final moments later.”

Urslars looked crestfallen as the reality of what had happened sank in. I couldn’t let him blame himself.

It wasn’t your fault.

“Who’s there...?”

I wanted to tell him the details, but I was pushing the limits of my Telepathy. Still, I needed him to know that his rampage hadn’t caused Kiara’s death. I didn’t know whether they were close, but they seemed to have known each other for a long time.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” said Aristeia. “But you didn’t kill her. The battle with the Fiend proved too much, that’s all.”

“I see...” said Urslars. “All right. I’ll borrow your guest room, then.”

“You know where the kitchen is if you’re hungry. The golems will cook something up for you.”

“Thanks.”

But he still looked sad as he climbed the stairs to the living quarters. Aristeia even looked a little worried about him, but only for a moment. Then she turned around and gave Fran a serious look.

“Now we can begin Teacher’s restoration. I don’t like leaving him this way.”

“Hm,” said Fran. “Go ahead.”

Thanks again.

“Don’t try to talk, Teacher.” She turned to Fran. “First, we’ll fix up his blade. I don’t know how simple the restoration will be, so I’ll need to take some samples for analysis. Then I’ll try to repair him using as few materials as possible and placing the least amount of strain on him. Understood?”

“???”

Nope, Fran didn’t catch a lick of that. Saying that Aristeia was more knowledgeable about weapon crafting than both of us combined was a massive understatement. All we could do was let her take care of me as best she could.

I'm in your...hurk!

“Keep the telepathy strip on. If you groan every time you talk, you’ll break my concentration.”

Aristea tied the telepathy strip back onto me. She and Fran would have to keep touching it to talk to me, but it made conversation a lot easier.

“Fran, place Teacher on the workbench.”

“Hm.”

“Now I can begin analysis. There’s food if you’re hungry, Fran.”

“I’m fine. I wanna watch.”

“Have it your way.”

And so, Aristea began her analysis. She used a lot of skills, spells, and manatech as I lay on the mithril-plated workbench. There was a drawer in the bench for her tools and equipment.

The room looked simple upon first glance, but these little props made it the perfect atelier. Her other tools must be stored in a similar way. Most of them were for identification and analysis, and I was impressed by her ability to process the information she gained. All the same, to an outside observer, she just looked like she was holding a mirror up to a broken sword. Hardly impressive.

This kind of thing normally left Fran bored right away, but even twenty minutes later, she was still intently watching Aristea’s work. She must be tired, but she was never restless. I guess she was really worried about me. I didn’t want her to worry, but I was happy at how much she loved me.

An hour later, Aristea had finally finished her preliminary examination. She wiped a bead of sweat from her chin.

“I knew it. You’re made of orichalcos.”

“Orichalcos?” Fran asked.

“It’s a metal only Godsmiths can create. It looks like harmorium to the untrained eye, but it is called the divine metal for a reason: it’s the stuff Godswords are made of.”

Divine metal? That sounded great!

S-so I'm made out of that?

“That’s right,” Aristeia confirmed.

“So, was Teacher made by a Godsmith?”

Hang on, I said instinctively. *Maybe an ordinary blacksmith forged me from a Godsmith’s orichalcos.*

I didn’t want to get my hopes up. Maybe I was made by a Godsmith, but if I wasn’t, I didn’t want to be that disappointed.

But Aristeia shook her head. “No. Only a Godsmith can forge orichalcos to its full potential. If nothing else, a Godsmith forged your exterior.”

Really? So does that make me...

A Godsword? Maybe that was what was sealed inside me—

“A Godsword?” she asked. “No. You don’t have a name.”

I knew I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up. After all, Godsmiths forged more than just Godswords.

Does that mean I’m a Godsmith-made, mass-produced weapon? I asked.

I felt happy and sad at the same time. It was weird. I mean, any throwaway weapon forged by a Godsmith would have far more potential than the life’s work of an ordinary smith. But I couldn’t help but feel that the latter had more value.

Nameless...

“Hold on,” said Aristeia. “It’s true that you don’t have a name *now*, but that might not always have been the case.”

What do you mean? I asked.

“Your name might have been erased.”

“Erased?” Fran asked.

You mean I started with a name, but it got deleted at some point?

“Correct. I might even have a lead on your origins.”

It sounded like she’d figured something out. If nothing else, she had a hunch.

“I can’t be sure about it, of course...”

“What do you mean?” said Fran.

“Hang on. Swordcrafting Truth.”

Aristea closed her eyes and focused to activate the skill. A transparent screen appeared in front of her, covered with pictures and words.

“What’s that?”

“Swordcrafting Truth,” Aristea explained. “The Godsmiths’ Class Skill. It’s like an encyclopedia of Godswords, and everything related to them. Godsmiths can access this knowledge at all times, but this is how we reveal it to others.”

So, it was a Knowledge Skill for sharing information. It was a pretty high-tech encyclopedia. The holographic screen looked like it belonged in a sci-fi movie rather than a world of magic.

“Not everyone can decipher the information, of course,” said Aristea. “Anyway, how about it? Would you like to see?”

I mean, I couldn’t really help it, since it was right in front of me...

Wait, what?

“I can’t read it.”

It didn’t even look like a cipher, more like a jumbled mess. Aristea didn’t look surprised. Instead, she nodded calmly.

“I knew it. What about the image?”

I see a sword.

The text might be scrambled, but there was nothing wrong with the picture. And the sword on the screen looked kind of familiar...

“Hm,” said Fran. “It looks a bit like you.”

Really? Now that you mention it...

Once Fran had pointed it out, I noticed the resemblance. It really *did* look like me. The blade and hilt were identical, although the emblem was completely different.

“No problems with the image, then,” said Aristea.

That must be the part she wanted us to see. She didn’t seem to have any problem with the words. Did they only look scrambled to unworthy eyes?

Are you saying this sword has something to do with me? I asked.

“Yes. Fran’s right. The resemblance is too close.”

She went through it a step at a time. First, the hilt was the same size and shape, and the strip hanging from the pommel was the exact same length and color. There's no way someone would bother replicating that kind of detail if I was just *inspired* by this sword. The blade was the same too, right down to the blue pattern running down it. And it was the same length.

The main difference was the pommel: mine bore an emblem of a wolf, but this sword had four humanoid faces. The maidens had their eyes closed and were surrounded by four pairs of angelic wings.

That's the only thing that's different...

"Indeed. It'll take too long to explain, so I'll talk as I repair you. Wait just a minute."

Aristea took a metal sphere from her item pouch. It was about the size of a basketball, and when she said an incantation over it, it started to change shape—weaving into fine threads until it looked like metallic cotton candy. Aristea pressed it against me, and the puff of woven metal wrapped around me, as though it had a will of its own. Next, she poured a gratuitous amount of a mulberry-colored potion over me. I had no idea what it was, and its suspicious shade made me worry a little, but I trusted her enough not to complain.

As she recited some more incantations, I felt mana flow through the metal fluff until my whole body was warm. Like being wrapped up in a blanket. It was a strange sensation, but not unwelcome. Godsmiths really were amazing!

"All right," said Aristea. "I'm infusing you with orichalcos. Your self-repair capabilities should resume soon."

So, this is orichalcos?

"That's right. I used my abilities to turn it into threads."

That's a lot of legendary material you're putting into me.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I can easily make more."

"Thanks," said Fran.

"All part of my job. Anyway, back to what we were talking about earlier."

She dragged some steel chairs from a corner of the workshop, sat down on one, and offered the other to Fran.

“As far as I can tell,” said Aristeia. “You’ve been worked on by multiple people.”

You’re saying that I have more than one maker?

“Kind of. I think your blade and your interior were made by different people.”

“Interior?” Fran asked.

“I mean his soul. Infusing a weapon with a human soul, and giving it the ability to consume crystals, is not metallurgy. It’s a completely different craft. We should assume that Teacher was made by two different people.”

“Okay.”

Sure.

As shocking as it sounded, I wasn’t too surprised. I didn’t know anything about myself, so the possibility of being crafted by multiple people was interesting, but nothing more. I guess it was like finding out I had multiple sets of parents.

Now that we were on the same page, Aristeia showed the picture to Fran.

“This is the Wisdom Sword Cherubim, one of the lost Godswords.”

“Cherubim?” Fran asked.

So, I look like a Godsword?

Now that *was* interesting! It meant a lot more now I’d seen a Godsword up close. They were the most powerful weapons in the world, and I looked like one of them.

“How did that happen?” said Fran.

“There are a few possibilities,” said Aristeia. “For example, Teacher could be a discarded Godsword.”

Discarded Godsword? Never heard that.

“I don’t know either,” said Fran.

“I suppose the subject isn’t common knowledge,” said Aristeia. “Let’s start there. They are exactly what they sound like. Any Godsword that can’t be destroyed is discarded. There are three main reasons why that might happen.

“One: it could be damaged beyond repair. Unfortunately, at that

point, a Godsword must be discarded.”

Is that even possible for a Godsword?

“There are beings of tremendous power in this world,” said Aristeia. “Like the Evil One and the Godbeasts. Even a Godsword cannot defeat such things.”

A weapon commissioned by the gods could still lose to the gods themselves. They were powerful, but not indestructible.

“Two: the forging process may have been faulty. Even at only half power, a faulty Godsword would still be very powerful. It’s also likely that it would lose control if it was ever wielded.”

These weapons weren’t quite Godswords. It seemed like a waste to dispose of them, but they could cause so much destruction that it wasn’t worth the risk—like a superweapon that could randomly blow up.

“Three: the Godsword is considered too powerful, and the order is given to destroy it.”

“Ordered?” Fran asked. “By who?”

“The gods. So far, there have been three Godswords to get the axe. They were far too dangerous, and the Godsmiths discarded them without ever demonstrating their full power.”

A Godsword that even the gods considered too powerful? That must be something else.

“Our Godswords are like children to us. It would have hurt those Godsmiths to discard them...” Aristeia frowned. “But it can’t be helped. We cannot create weapons so powerful that they might destroy the world. That’s why we do our best to maintain the existing Godswords. They’re the only ones to escape destruction.”

Was that why she took a liking to us? She sounded like a huge sword nerd.

“So, what were the three swords?” Fran asked.

“One of them was the Nuclear Sword Meltdown. Its details aren’t listed in Swordcrafting Truth, but it was a powerful weapon, and capable of emitting deadly poison. It could turn the world into a desolate wasteland with ease if left alone. So it was quickly discarded.”

Powerful and poisonous...it sounded like radiation. With a name like Meltdown, that’s probably exactly what it was. We didn’t know the

extent of its power, but it could probably do lasting damage to the environment after only a couple of battles. No wonder the gods wanted to be rid of it.

“There was also the Sentence Sword Judgment. It could emulate the judgment of the gods. Ultimately, the gods saw that it could twist the foundations of the world, so they discarded it.”

I couldn't even imagine that one. I guess any weapon that could enact the justice of the gods, without their mercy, was too dangerous to exist.

“And then there was the Wisdom Sword Cherubim. It contained all the knowledge of the Sanctuary and was even able to interfere with it. However, it became apparent that humans could use it to view whatever knowledge they pleased, even if it wasn't for human eyes.”

I guess the gods didn't want dangerous knowledge spreading through this world. Like the knowledge of nuclear fusion, for example. But what did that sword have to do with me? I was starting to feel afraid.

“Do you understand why Godswords are discarded now?” Aristeia asked.

“For the most part.”

Yeah.

“Now,” she said. “Regarding your connection with Cherubim.”

Finally! I was getting tense.

“Of course, this is just my theory. But, if you were going to discard a Godsword, how would you go about it?”

“Hm. Throw it away?” said Fran.

That won't work. If they're too dangerous to exist, then I guess you just melt them down and make ingots out of them...

A chill ran down my spine. I didn't want to think about being melted down. It was a brutal way to go for a human, but even more horrifying now that I was a sword.

“True,” said Aristeia. “You could smelt it back into lumps of orichalcos, but isn't that a bit of a waste?”

Now that you mention it...

Forging a Godsword must require tremendous time and effort. Destroying it would be a huge loss, even if you *could* recover the materials. I sure couldn't do it. If I were a Godsmith, I'd do all I could to reuse it in a different way.

"Exactly," said Aristea. "As flawed as a discarded Godsword might be, they are still excellent swords. So, they took away a portion of its problematic abilities and reforged the exterior."

So, that's how I was made?

"Maybe," she said. "It's just a hunch. A Godsword that's lost its abilities still has far more potential than a run-of-the-mill enchanted sword. The vessel is of far higher quality, and imbuing it with a new ability is simple enough."

But why was my emblem different? My wolf looked nothing like the angels in the picture.

"That is a simple cosmetic matter," she said. "It would make sense to give a new sword a new look, would it not?"

"Hm. True," said Fran.

"Either way, it's just a hypothesis. It's also possible that Teacher is a failure crafted before the forging of Cherubim. He might be a kind of brother-sword to Cherubim, or a failed prototype."

"Teacher isn't a failure," Fran said immediately.

What a good girl!

Thanks, Fran.

"Teacher is a great sword."

"Sorry," said Aristea. "I didn't mean to offend."

"Hm."

"The only thing I can say for sure is that he is linked to Cherubim somehow. He may even share some abilities with it."

Cherubim's powers...

All this talk about my potential predecessor made me think of the other existence inside me: the P.A.

I could still hear her mechanical voice when I leveled up, but we couldn't hold a conversation anymore. It happened when I used Unleash Potential for the first time, in the battle with the Lich. I remembered the

P.A.'s voice, and how much it sounded like a farewell.

I thank you, Specimen Teacher. The gods did not suffer me to exist, and the craftsman deleted my name. Though I was only to live as a vessel, I was glad I could serve you, my master, if only during my last moments. May the God of Wisdom guide you.

It sounded a lot like what Aristeia was saying. In fact, the P.A. even mentioned Sanctuary when I was under Unleashed Potential.

Attempting access to Sanctuary. Success. Accessing Library. Received information on Heavensight in exchange for losing access privileges. Constructing Heavensight-- >

I was pretty sure that's what she said. It sounded like she was accessing the knowledge base of Sanctuary and interfering with it, just like Cherubim. I needed to tell Aristeia about the P.A.

"Interesting," she said, after I'd explained. "Perhaps that was the last vestiges of Cherubim. If that is the case, then I would say it's very likely that's how you were made."

I feel like I've heard that somewhere before too.

The mysterious voice. The one I heard when I first Awakened. It had advised me on numerous occasions, but I still didn't know who it was.

That voice said that the P.A. was "A remnant of an existence long gone. Unleash Potential just happened to bring that personality forth again. Even that remnant is gone now, taken as the price for going over your limits."

That voice was as mysterious as the P.A. It wasn't hostile. In fact, it was quite friendly, but I had no way of finding out who it was. Still, there was a chance that I could learn more about it.

Actually, there's another voice inside of me, besides the P.A. This one's more of a person.

"Really? What is it like?"

Hmm...

How could I explain that there was this rough-looking man inside me? He said that his power would recover during the Festival of the Moons, but our conversation kept getting interrupted. Still, he knew more about me than I knew about myself.

“That’s not much to go on,” said Aristeia.

I don’t really know his name, or what he looks like. Wait, I guess I saw him once.

He appeared to me that night in Bulbola. I had recently used Unleash Potential, and it had taken a huge toll on him. He could only speak through gestures.

A middle-aged man. Silver hair, slicked back. He wore some kind of flowing robe.

“Doesn’t ring any bells,” she said.

No, I suppose not.

There were probably plenty of silver-haired men in this world. His physical description wasn’t enough to go on.

Let me think... Right! Apparently, he’s watching over something that’s sealed inside me.

“A seal?” Aristeia asked.

So, this was back in Seedrun...

The seal was weakened by Soul Drain, and I started emitting some kind of black mana. The voice told me that he was doing all he could to hold it back and eventually managed to reestablish the seal inside of me.

“I see,” she said. “Sounds like a close call. I’ll keep that in mind when I conduct internal analysis. After we fix your blade, of course.”

If I could just talk with that man again, everything might come to light. I hoped Aristeia could help me achieve that.

“I’ll try to establish contact with that man again,” she said.

You can do that?!

I almost couldn’t believe her. Was there anything these Godsmiths couldn’t do?!

“Hold on. I don’t know for certain that I can do it, but I can try.

You should temper your expectations.”

As long as you take a shot at it.

“I’ll do my best.”

As for any other useful bits of information...uh, I’m a servant of the God of Chaos. Does that help?

“The God of Chaos? Not the God of Wisdom?”

Yeah.

“I see... A Godsword possesses the power of the gods, as you might expect. Normally, the god associated with it does the imbuing. Cherubim was the servant of the God of Wisdom, but you’re telling me that you serve the God of Chaos... Very interesting. I’ll look into it.”

At least that seemed useful. Was there anything else I could tell her?

Oh, do you happen to know anything about the place where I was found?

“The Demon Wolf’s Garden?” she asked. “No. I could only tell you more if I inspected your altar in person.”

I see.

“I’ve never been there,” said Aristeia. “I’ve traversed each continent in the last hundred years, but the Garden has escaped me so far.”

“A hundred years?” Fran asked.

What? How old are you?

That was more interesting to me than all the places she’d travelled. Aristeia *looked* human, but if she appeared this young when she was over a hundred years old, then she must be one of the longer-lived races.

“I’m a half elf,” she said.

A half elf?

“But your ears. Amanda’s were pointy.”

Fran was right. The A-Rank whip master Amanda was also a half elf, and her ears were elven in shape. Aristeia’s ears looked human.

“Oh, so I take it you have some half elf acquaintances?”

“Hm.”

“I suppose my father’s blood is stronger in me,” she said. “He’s my human parent. I take after him.”

I guess half elves didn’t have to look like elves.

“Although I owe my extended lifespan to my work, as well as to my race.”

Your work affects your lifespan?

“My Class Skill affects it. Prime Physique. As its name implies, it keeps my body in its prime, thereby extending my lifespan.”

How was a skill that kept you young the Class Skill of a blacksmith? I suppose blacksmiths *did* need their bodies to be in prime condition for their work. And Aristeia’s skeletomuscular system wasn’t the only thing that was enhanced.

For starters, she didn’t seem the type to fuss about her skin or hair. I doubted that she did anything with them, which meant that the life force from her skill must spill over and maintain their beauty. By the sound of it, Prime Physique wasn’t her only Class Skill either. I wouldn’t be surprised if Godsmiths had access to several of them.

“But enough about me,” she said. “Your exterior is all fixed up. The interior is next.”

That sounded pretty scary.

Wh-what are you going to do? Will you take me apart?

“Only as a last resort. What’s wrong? Are you afraid?”

Of course I am! It’s like getting surgery... I can’t help but worry.

“Really? How interesting.”

That doesn’t make me feel any better.

“Ah, apologies. This is my first time talking to a sentient sword,” said Aristeia. “Everything you say is of great interest to me.”

Aristeia’s eyes glistened with curiosity. Was this how a vet would behave if animals could talk?

S-seriously, though, don’t take me apart unless you absolutely have to.

“Do not worry,” she said. “You’re in the hands of a Godsmith. That said, the analysis and repairs will take quite some time. I hope you’re ready.”

I am.

“What about you, Fran? You are welcome to watch, but there really is nothing you can do.”

“I’ll stay,” Fran said, still adamant, even if there was nothing she could do.

“Woof!”

Jet came out of the shadows and barked at Aristeia. She must have realized that there was no changing their minds.

She shrugged. “Suit yourselves.”

Then she took a deep breath and turned her attention to me.

“We shall begin. All you need to do is sit still, Teacher.”

Got it.

“Hee hee.”

What?

“I never thought I’d have to ask a sword to stay still during a restoration.”

She might laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but she turned serious as soon as she laid her hands over me.

“Parsesight...!”

She inspected me, her eyes saturated with mana. It was the same Identification Skill she’d used when we first met, but this time she looked more intense.

“...”

“...”

No one spoke. Aristeia’s focus was palpable, and Fran and Jet did their best not to break it. All of them looked tense. The only thing I could hear in the chrome-lit room was the sound of their breathing.

“...”

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

Beads of sweat rolled down Aristeia’s chin. How long had it been?

It felt like she had been concentrating forever. I could only imagine how much energy it took. Meanwhile, Fran watched her work intently.

“Phew.”

Aristea sighed. It was over, and she looked exhausted.

You’re done? I asked.

“To a degree. Sorry about that.”

Why was she apologizing?

A-am I a lost cause?

“No,” she said. “Don’t worry. I can fix you, that much is certain.”

Man, don’t scare me like that!

“I apologize for taking so much time, but even then, I was not able to finish analyzing you.”

Oh, I see. But you must have figured something out.

“You could say that. I certainly have enough information to fix you.”

That sounded good. I mean, I *did* want to know more about myself, but restoration came first. I’m glad that’s all it was. She had me worried for a second.

“I’ll share my findings as I carry out your restoration,” said Aristea.

That would be great, thank you.

She placed several flasks of magical fluid beside me and started mixing them—showing her skill as an alchemist as well as a smith. As she swirled the flasks, the compounds reacted with each other, emitting powerful mana.

“I’m going to apply this solution. Don’t be alarmed if you feel any changes.”

All right.

She carefully spread the solution over my blade, and I felt something welling up inside me. It wasn’t like the dark and violent impulse that Mad Ogre gave me; this was warm and gentle. It spread out all over my body.

“That should repair your mana circuits. How do you feel?”

It's nice. Like I just stepped into a warm bath.

"What an interesting way of putting it. You really *were* human once," she said with a grin. "Your comments may seem unremarkable, but I might be the first person ever to hear how restoration feels for the sword!"

She must feel like the first person to climb Mt. Everest.

"Is Teacher fixed now?" Fran asked, noticing the expectation in her eyes.

"Not yet. This solution will patch up any large fractures in his mana circuits, but it won't fix the smaller cracks and deeper breaks. This is the most difficult thing I've done since crafting a Godsword! I can't wait!"

Whatever she needed to do, it sounded like it would involve a lot of fine work. It was nice to see her so motivated, but I started to get the feeling that this would take a lot of time.

It was also surprising to hear that she had a Godsword under her belt, although I suppose that's what Godsmiths did. Still, it was good to know I was in the hands of such an amazing smith.

However, Fran seemed disappointed to find out that I wasn't fixed yet. She sat back down.

"Oh."

"No need to be sad," said Aristeia. "It's going to take time, but Teacher will be back to normal by the end."

"Really?"

"I'd bet my Godsword on it!"

I guess that was her way of giving her guarantee...but would she really give us a Godsword if she couldn't fix me? Honestly, that might be a better deal for Fran...

"You can keep your Godsword," Fran said. "Just get Teacher back to normal."

Fran!

She was such a good daughter!

"It was a figure of speech," said Aristeia. "Don't worry, I'll get him back to normal. As for what his new normal will look like, well..."

What?

“Nothing,” she said. “Just talking to myself. I’ll make a full restoration.”

Okay...

“The fluid will take a while to fix you up. In the meantime, I’ll tell you about my findings.”

“Hm!”

Thanks.

I still wanted to find out more about myself while I had the chance. If we had some time before she could work on me again, we might as well use it.

“You should be able to use your own Telepathy now, Teacher.”

Really?

Testing, one, two. Fran, can you hear me?

“Hm! Yeah!”

It worked! And it didn’t hurt! There was a bit of lag in activating it, but it didn’t otherwise hinder our conversation.

“You said you had two entities inside of you,” said Aristeia.

Yeah, the P.A. and the mysterious voice.

“We’ll start with the P.A.”

Sure.

“Hm,” said Fran.

She’d never talked to the P.A., so she wasn’t particularly enthusiastic, but she still wanted to learn more about me and listened attentively. It made me feel so loved. Like I was sick, and I had my family here to care for me.

“The P.A. is heavily damaged,” Aristeia reported. “She exists inside a joint deep within the sword. You see, your interior spreads out like nerves throughout the whole of the sword. This P.A. is...was...a specialist in processing information to help its master—that would be you, Teacher.”

She still tells me when I level up. Always has, actually.

There wasn’t much of a difference in how she behaved before and

after the Unleash Potential incident. Then again, I was only scratching the surface.

“Well,” said Aristeia. “She’s also meant to assist you in activating your skills and in making calculations.”

She’s supposed to help me whenever I use my skills and spells?

“That’s right. But, before you could enjoy those benefits, she was heavily damaged. Her functions would have become more important the stronger you became.”

According to Aristeia, the P.A. was there for the day I got stronger. If I still had her around, maybe it wouldn’t have hurt when I pushed myself. Either way, she certainly warned me when I was approaching my limits. If it wasn’t for her sacrifice, the Lich would’ve killed us on the sky isle.

So, can you fix her?

That was the most pressing question on my mind. But Aristeia shook her head.

“Unfortunately, no. It’s a miracle that the vestiges of Cherubim survived as long as they did. Now, she’s broken beyond all repair.”

If Aristeia said she couldn’t fix it, then no one could.

I see...

“The best I can do is reinforce the vestiges of her, so things don’t get worse.”

Thanks, I appreciate it.

The P.A. taught me a lot when I was just starting out. She gave me knowledge and made for decent company. If there was something we could do to make sure that she didn’t fade away entirely, that was good enough for me.

I leave her in your hands.

“You got it.”

Aristeia nodded seriously and sent mana through my blade. This time, an even more comfortable warmth surrounded me. I could even feel it emanating from inside. It really *did* feel like a warm bath.

As Aristeia worked, Jet, Fran, and I watched quietly. After all, the last thing we wanted to do was disturb her.

“That’s most of it done,” Aristeia said sometime later. “Provided the P.A. doesn’t push herself, she shouldn’t break down any further.”

Really? Thanks! That’s great.

Fran and Jet looked relieved too.

“Hm. Great.”

“Woof!”

“So,” Aristeia said, still sending mana through my body. “About the mysterious voice.”

Did you figure something out? I asked.

Perhaps she’d been able to pinpoint the voice. Maybe she could even summon it!

“I did discover something,” she said. “But even less than I was able to find out about the last vestiges of Cherubim.”

Uh-huh.

“There is another soul deep within the sword. Currently, it is in a weakened state.”

The voice wasn’t a legacy feature of a discarded Godsword. It sounded like he was something sealed inside the sword—like me.

“Your ability to absorb crystals probably belongs to this soul,” said Aristeia.

So, he could absorb magic and skills from crystals while he was still alive and walking around? But then, why can I use his powers? And what’s he doing inside a sword to begin with?

“And there’s the complicated part,” she said. “Teacher, you are far stranger and more complex than you think.”

Uh, what? Complex and strange...? I didn’t like the sound of that, but it was too late to back out now. I might be a sword, but a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do!

Tell me.

“First, I would like to see you absorb a crystal. Can you do that?”

I guess it might help her figure out what was going on.

“Here,” said Fran.

“What do you do with the crystal?” Aristeia asked.

“You cut it against him.”

“I see.”

Fran gave her a crystal and, when Aristeia followed her instructions, I began to absorb it. Smooth as clockwork. The crystal was weak, and rather unsatisfying, but I absorbed it all the same.

Well? I asked.

“I see. That was an interesting mana current. And it looks like my analysis was correct. You do not gain power directly from consuming crystals.”

What? How can that be?

“The mana doesn’t flow straight to you. It goes to this *other* soul.”

Aristeia explained the process. When I absorbed a crystal, this other soul gained its power. The soul was quite damaged, and his existence alone was quite unusual. Aristeia posited that perhaps he’d been sealed within a Godsword to maintain his existence. Either way, the power I got from crystals was something shared with me by that soul.

“This soul is probably the owner of the mysterious voice,” said Aristeia. “And he is no ordinary soul. He is so powerful that I can’t analyze him.”

Any idea who it is?

“No. But he doesn’t seem malicious. In fact, he seems willing to cooperate with you.”

He’d seemed friendly enough when I met him, so it was nice to know that Aristeia agreed. He wasn’t my enemy. The complicated part was my evolution system. Apparently, something *else* was handling that part of me.

Are you saying that there’s another thing inside of me...? As if having an extra soul isn’t weird enough!

“I know it sounds strange, but it’s the best way I can describe it.”

The vestiges of Cherubim and the mysterious soul were working together, but apparently, there was a third thing. It didn’t have a will or a soul, so Aristeia assumed it was some kind of program run by internal manatech.

“I don’t know who made it, or how, but its mechanisms are clear enough. That said, it’s extremely advanced, and I couldn’t analyze it completely.”

Too advanced even for Aristeia the Godsmith?

“To be clear,” she said, “whoever made this system is a beast. They’re the Godsmith equivalent of a manatechnician and alchemist, and I’m not sure if such classes even exist. In any case, I am a blacksmith. As such, I’m ill-equipped to deal with it.”

W-wow.

“The closest thing I can compare it to is a dungeon core,” she said with a wry smile. “It is a creation of such complexity and intricacy that I can only feel defeated.”

Anything that could make a Godsmith like her feel defeated must be astonishing. Even just thinking about the powers this thing possessed was exciting.

All right, so what does this mysterious system do?

“You see—”

The system was created, first and foremost, to manage the mysterious soul. It existed between me and the soul and allowed him to transfer powers to me. Of course, that was only possible because he was kind enough to share them. The soul possessed such great power that I couldn’t possibly use it all.

The same thing applied to skill acquisition. The soul could gain skills from crystals, but it was difficult for me to use them. After all, he might be sealed within me, but we were still separate people. That’s where this mysterious system came in: when the soul acquired skills, the system converted them into a form I could use. That was also the foundation of the Skill Sharing I did with Fran. This system allowed me to use the mysterious soul’s powers, and it was even involved in my rank-ups and EP.

“But I have no idea why you have a crystal counter,” said Aristeia. “The system could enhance your powers without it.”

I could get stronger just by absorbing crystals?

Now that she mentioned it, that did make sense.

“Something like that,” she said. “So, why do you need these

arbitrary crystal requirements?”

Maybe it's so I'll take things one step at a time? Perhaps it would put the sword under too much pressure if I got too strong too quickly.

“Perhaps. All I can say is that the system reflects its maker’s eccentricity and playfulness.”

“You can tell that?”

“That’s the impression I got from analyzing it,” she said. “I can imagine this whole system being implemented on a whim.”

“On a whim...” said Fran.

If that really was the case, then whoever made me must have huffed too many Godsword fumes.

“Oh,” said Aristeia. “One more thing. You mentioned that you don’t get many crystals from powerful Fiends. I think that’s because this *other* soul can’t absorb their Malice.”

If a crystal was too heavily infected, the soul couldn’t use it to heal himself. The same thing probably applied for Fiendmancy—no matter how many Fiend crystals I consumed, I could never acquire it. It also explained why weaker Fiends still yielded a decent number of crystals, as they were still powered by regular mana as well as Malice.

It's all so complicated. I need to think about this.

First off, there are three entities inside me: the vestiges of Cherubim that formed the P.A., the mystery soul, and now this strange system.

The P.A. was responsible for sorting through outside information, so now that I thought about it, I probably owed my sense of sight and touch to her.

You really are a big help, and I hope you're conscious enough to hear me say that. Thank you.

She also had telepathic abilities, which made her something of a personal assistant. A personal assistant with the voice of a public announcement system. Heh.

The only thing Aristeia knew about the mystery soul was that he was sealed inside me. He seemed to be heavily damaged and was absorbing crystals to heal himself. After absorbing what he needed, he passed the leftover energy on to me. That might mean that the

satisfaction I felt when I absorbed a crystal was actually his...

Which meant I wasn't the one who loved eating crystals! This strange fetish belonged to *him*! He was the reason why I couldn't help moaning in pleasure every time I cracked into one of them!

Meanwhile, the system converted the energy he absorbed into a form I could use. Without it, I would probably have been destroyed by the soul's excess energy, which was a frightening thought. The system also governed my use of EP.

We didn't know who had made it, but they definitely had a sick playful side.

The more we find out, the more curious I am about my maker.

"From my analysis, at least four people have worked on you. One of them is definitely Elmera, Cherubim's Godsmith."

Elmera...

Considering the fact that Aristeia had only done a material analysis, that was a pretty big piece of information. If we could track down Elmera, maybe we'd discover even more.

"As for the mystery soul," said Aristeia, "it's probably more like a monster than a human. Still, it must have agreed to be sealed within you and have such an elaborate system built around it."

So, this monster cooperated with my maker?

"There are monsters wiser than humans," she said. "Like Godbeasts, for example. Their powers far transcend ours. Perhaps something happened, and he chose to be sealed inside you."

I was convinced that the soul was human. The way he pretended to apologize when he appeared to me in Bulbola was so comically human. But then, I suppose Jet seemed human sometimes too. Maybe all higher monsters were like that.

"Which leaves the unknown system," said Aristeia. "Elmera and I are both Godsmiths, so I can tell for sure that it isn't her work."

Well, then, I guess it must be someone else. One of Elmera's collaborators must have constructed it. But if they could create a system beyond the skills of a Godsmith, it was hard to imagine what kind of expertise they had.

So many people had been involved in my creation: Cherubim's

Godsmith, the mysterious soul, the architect of this unknown system... and then there was whoever had brought me to this world. The small matter of my own soul.

What about me? Who sealed me in here?

“Yes,” said Aristeia. “You’re the biggest mystery of them all, Teacher. I don’t know who forged you into this blade. I *can* say that it certainly wasn’t Elmera. And, considering how damaged the mystery soul is, I don’t think it was him either.”

What about the system architect?

“That is a possibility. However...”

What is it?

“This is only my gut instinct as a Godsmith, but...there’s a difference in the work itself.”

What do you mean?

“I mean that the one who crafted the system and whoever who linked you to the sword’s mana circuits are two different people.”

I guess I’d have to take her word for it. Back on Earth, there were craftsmen who could spot the differences in fine detail that were invisible to everyone else. This was probably the same sort of thing.

“I can’t even find out *how* they sealed you in this sword, *or* how you ended up bound to the God of Chaos. It’s all one big mystery after another... Godsmith or not, I am stumped.” She scoffed. “I should rename Parsesight to Farcesight.”

Despite her attempts to brush it aside, she was genuinely frustrated. She looked like she might sulk for the rest of the day, but then she remembered she was in the middle of giving a lecture.

“Actually,” she said, regaining her composure. “I don’t even know why they put you in the sword to begin with.”

Go on.

“Think of the timeline. The Wisdom Sword Cherubim was discarded, and the mystery soul was sealed inside. Then, someone constructed the unknown system, intending to pass the mystery soul’s powers onto you.”

Uh-huh.

“I assume the system was still set up for the benefit of the mystery soul. The stronger you got, the more crystals you would seek out. And more crystals means a faster recovery for the mystery soul.”

It sounded like we were doing exactly what my makers wanted us to do. Or rather, *Fran* was doing it, since I was technically a part of this mess. Still, it all worked out to Fran’s benefit, so I couldn’t complain. In fact, this unknown system was what allowed me and Fran to meet in the first place.

But then Aristeia proceeded to drop a bombshell.

“But that just makes me wonder: Do they really need you at all, Teacher?”

What?

“I think you were sealed into the sword around the time the system was finished—you’re something of a set, you see. But why does this system need *you*?”

“Teacher is important!” Fran said, speaking up for the first time in a long while.

I guess she couldn’t let that go unchallenged. She might have been silent, but she was still listening. The fact that she’d even managed to stay awake through our complicated discussions showed how much she’d grown. I was touched.

“Save your glaring,” said Aristeia. “I didn’t mean to insult him. I just wondered why he is necessary. Even if Teacher wasn’t here, Fran would still benefit from the soul’s powers.”

It was a good point. Between Skill Sharing and the P.A., Fran could still pick whatever skills and powers she wanted.

Was I...unnecessary?

“Teacher is necessary!” said Fran. “He teaches me things!”

Fran...

“Hm!”

I was so glad to be her sword!

“I wouldn’t say he is unnecessary,” said Aristeia. “Clearly, a sapient sword has great benefits, and whoever made this sword wouldn’t shove a human soul inside it for no reason. So, there *must* be a reason that Teacher is here. That being said, I can’t analyze him deeply enough to

find out why...”

Still, you’ve cleared up a lot of stuff. And we never would have found out any of this without you.

We learned a lot today. I now understood how my powers worked and that I was somehow connected to this Elmera person. Not to mention the fact that I was a repurposed Godsword.

“There was one other thing inside you that I couldn’t analyze,” said Aristeia. “I don’t know whether it has anything to do with your role, but it was located in the deepest part of the sword.”

You couldn’t scan it at all?

“Not an inch. Unlike your other parts, it has anti-analysis and parsing measures. And they are strong enough to prevent me from analyzing it.”

Care to guess what it does?

“No idea. Don’t have enough information. I don’t even know what it’s for but...from what you’ve told me, I assume that is where the black mana is sealed.”

The thing that went berserk in Seedrun. The one the voice is watching over.

“Like I said, it’s just a guess. Sorry I can’t tell you more.”

She smiled wryly again, but she’d already exceeded my expectations. There was no way we would have learned so much without her.

It all somewhat supports my little theory about this mystery soul. Well, I guess it’s more of a flight of fancy than anything.

“Go on,” said Aristeia.

It’s just a little story I tell myself.

That the mystery soul was Fenrir. I had no idea what a legendary monster was doing in my sword, and it was probably presumptuous of me to even think it, but the circumstantial evidence was quite strong: my wolf emblem, how Jet bore the title of Great Wolf Clan, the fact that the mystery soul was some kind of monster, and even how I woke in the Demon Wolf’s Garden, famed to be the resting place of the legendary Fenrir.

It was so possible that it almost felt plausible. I couldn’t help but

connect the dots.

“Fenrir. I see,” said Aristeia.

What do you think?

“It’s certainly possible. Monsters have dwelled inside Godswords in the past, lending their powers to the user. And there are standard enchanted weapons called Beast Weapons.”

Do they work by controlling souls?

Jean, the necromancer, said that souls were the dominion of the gods. Whichever Godsmith had devised me needed to find some way to meddle with that. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. If nothing else, I was proof that there *was* a way to control someone’s soul. But Beast Weapons were nowhere near as complicated.

“Controlling a soul is difficult, but binding the soul into a sword? Not so much.”

Sounds straightforward.

“It is, and the same principle applies for Godswords.”

“Which Godswords have monsters in them?” Fran asked.

I’d like to know too.

Aristeia counted them off on her fingers. “There’s the Demon King Sword Diablos, the Cruel Dragon Sword Lindworm, and the Serpent Lord Sword Jormugandr. There was also Gold Dragon Sword El Dorado, but that has been destroyed.”

“Godswords can break?” Fran asked.

I was curious about that as well. Aristeia mentioned that Godswords were discarded when they were broken beyond repair.

I think the list we saw specified which ones were broken too.

Lumina, Ulmutt’s dungeon master, had shown us a partial list of Godswords. It noted the discarded Godswords too: Cherubim, Judgment, and Meltdown. The other destroyed swords that it listed were Fanatic and Holy Order. Now, we could add El Dorado to that list. But how could these Godswords be destroyed so easily?

“Like I said,” said Aristeia. “Godswords aren’t invincible. They can be destroyed by anything that’s stronger than them, and if two Godsword users fought with each other, one of them could easily end

up broken.”

A battle between Godsword users...

The destruction would probably be like a natural disaster.

“As for Fanatic and Holy Order,” she went on, “those two have a particular history together.”

“Meaning?” Fran asked.

“Fanatic was a strange sword, made in strange circumstances. Dionis, the Godsmith who forged it, was notorious for creating peculiar weapons.”

“Peculiar?” Fran said. “How?”

“There was the Mad Sword Berserk, which gave its user immense power at the cost of their sanity. The creation of the Demon King Sword Diablos is rumored to have involved the sacrifice of a saint and is said to control demons. The Hypocrite Sword Pacifist can control other people. Dionis’s Godswords brought out the worst in humanity.”

Those powers sounded horrible. With that kind of track record, who knew what Fanatic could do?

“Put simply,” said Aristeia, “Fanatic connected the minds of people.”

You mean like Telepathy?

“What’s so bad about that?” Fran asked.

Maybe it made people fight by revealing their deepest desires? But its real powers were more gruesome than that.

“Maybe that’s not the best way to put it,” said Aristeia. “Fanatic can amalgamate its victim’s mind with its user.”

Amalgamate? So, two people become one?

“Yes, but only the minds. Whenever someone was cut by Fanatic, their mind was absorbed by its user.”

What happened to their body?

“Here’s where it gets grotesque.”

Fanatic maintained a connection to the body even *after* assimilating their mind. The body might still *appear* to be a separate entity, but now it was a part of Fanatic’s user. Simply put, once their minds had been assimilated, the user could control multiple bodies.

However, the Godsword allowed the husk to behave as it had when it was whole.

“It absorbed everything. Their memories, experiences, emotions, all of it. The question is: Do you think anyone could stay sane after assimilating dozens of minds? Or even hundreds?”

No way.

“Exactly. And that’s what happened. Its user’s mind expanded until they lost control. The Godsmith Ulmer saw this danger and created specifically to combat it. The two swords clashed, and both were destroyed in the ensuing conflict.”

I guess Godsmiths were people too, and they interacted with each other the same way as everyone else.

Wasn’t Ulmer the one who created the first Godsword? Alpha, isn’t it?

“You know your Godswords,” Aristeia agreed. “He received a vision from the gods and became the world’s first Godsmith.”

Ulmer and Dionis lived in the same era?

“Yes. In fact, they were brothers. Ulmer was the oldest, and Dionis was his apprentice.”

I pictured the two smiths hammering away at the forge. Being Ulmer’s apprentice was no small feat.

“But he was bitterly jealous of Ulmer,” said Aristeia. “He could never forgive him for the fact that the gods exalted him as the greatest of all blacksmiths. So Dionis watched his brother work, stole his techniques, and became a Godsmith on his own.”

That’s amazing.

Godsmithing wasn’t something you could learn just through observation. Dionis must have been extraordinary to make that kind of leap by sheer willpower.

“He was brilliant,” said Aristeia. “Ulmer said in his memoirs, ‘My brother is the real genius. That is what makes him dangerous.’ The people who were alive at that time enjoyed the patronage of two Godsmiths, and there were many Godswords.”

Dionis was probably trying to get back at his brother. If Ulmer created proper and well-rounded Godswords, he would create monstrous ones to defeat them.

“But I digress,” said Aristeia. “Let’s go back to discussing the Godswords with monsters inside of them.”

Oh, yeah, that’s what we were talking about.

I didn’t mind the diversion. After all, we probably wouldn’t have another chance to interview a Godsmith.

“As I said, it’s not impossible that Fenrir is sealed inside of you.”

You think that the one who made me wanted to save Fenrir’s soul from destruction?

“If it really is Fenrir, then yes, perhaps.”

We should look into Fenrir more when we got the chance. If the mystery soul wasn’t him after all, then we would have wasted our time, but...we’d just have to cross that bridge when we got to it.

We should check out the Garden again.

“Hm,” Fran agreed.

“Hmm...” said Aristeia. “If you give me more time, I might be able to find out the identity of the soul sealed inside of you.”

“How much time do you need?” Fran asked.

“A couple years, give or take.”

Nope.

“Not happening.”

I didn’t want to spend Fran’s formative years sitting in Aristeia’s atelier. Sure, we could learn a lot, but this beastgirl was born for adventure. Besides, we still had a promise to keep with Garrus. We needed to go back to Granzell for the auctions.

“Understandable,” said Aristeia. “I won’t force you.”

Still, she looked slightly disappointed. She must be genuinely frustrated that her analysis hadn’t discovered more.

“Well,” she said. “With all that out of the way, we can proceed to restoration and remodeling.”

“Remodeling?” Fran asked.

I thought you were just going to fix me.

I just wanted to get back to normal.

“True, but you lack Cherubim’s vestiges. A basic restoration just

won't cut it."

You mean it wouldn't be enough?

"Cherubim was supposed to play a big role in managing your skills. Without her, you lack the power to process all of them. That's the main reason why you broke."

Cherubim was supposed to help me do it, but I was doing it alone.

"If I fix you without remodeling," said Aristeia. "You'll just end up breaking again."

What does remodeling involve? Can you increase my processing power?

"No. I don't have the capacity to do that. You're something of a pseudo-Godsword. In fact, you may as well be a Godsword yourself at this point—you have all the intricacies and complexities of one. And they aren't something I can treat easily."

Aristeia couldn't help with my hardware, but she could still treat my software, although it would be difficult. To put it another way, I had a lot of programs running in the background and they were taxing my memory. As long as that went on, I wouldn't have the resources to run my finer processes.

My knowledge from Earth made it all surprisingly easy to follow, but Fran just tilted her head and looked confused.

So, you're going to prune away the unnecessary bits?

"You catch on quick," said Aristeia. "Exactly right. Specifically, we are going to reduce your number of skills. You probably could've had an infinite number of skills with Cherubim but, the way it is now, the more you have, the heavier the burden they place on you."

Every time I absorbed a crystal and acquired a new skill, it pushed me closer to my limit, and I got a *boatload* of skills during our last battle. In fact, I'd got about fifty—most of them minor things like Musical Instrument and Dancing. Perhaps the more intelligent monsters had hobbies, just like people. In any case, they contributed a great deal to my recent bloat. There were also a ton of skills I couldn't use, like Enhanced Scales and Spiny Bristles. In total, I think I had about a hundred and fifty skills. When I told Aristeia, she groaned.

"That's insane."

“Hm. Teacher has a lot of skills.”

“Look...even Godswords only have thirty at most. They get unwieldy at fifty, and you have a *hundred and fifty*? You’re asking for a meltdown. Especially since over half of them are advanced or compound skills. Your average Godsword would be destroyed by now!”

Oh...

“Honestly, I think you got off easy with a little pain.”

I guess I really was pushing myself. Just as well that I’d never lost control. And we were *really* fortunate to meet her when we did. If we hadn’t, I would’ve gone on fighting, and things...would’ve ended poorly. I didn’t even want to think about how devastated Fran would be if she’d lost me. And just after losing Kiara too...

I couldn’t break just yet. I had to make sure of it.

“Why do you feel pain, Teacher?” Fran asked, tilting her head.

Huh? Well, according to Aristeia, it’s because I’m under a lot of stress.

“I think what she means is: How can you feel pain without a body?” Aristeia said. It was quite the mystery, but she seemed to have an answer. “If your soul were artificial, then you wouldn’t feel pain. You wouldn’t even know what it was. But, because you used to be human, the impression of pain remains in your soul. You remember what it feels like to exert yourself until it hurts.”

I-I see.

So, even if I couldn’t *feel* pain, my mind anticipated it, thereby giving me the impression of it.

“As to why you don’t feel pain when your blade breaks, I’m not so sure. Either the sensation of breaking metal is so different from human pain that you don’t recognize it, or it’s just simply because swords don’t feel pain. It’s one of the two. Either way, it’s just as well that it *does* hurt to overexert yourself. If it didn’t, you wouldn’t have realized that you were lacking the vestiges of Cherubim.”

Aristeia made a good point. If the pain hadn’t forced me to back off, I would have fought Murelia and Theraclede until I broke forever.

“For your remodeling,” she said, “we’ll need to get rid of all unnecessary skills and reduce the frequency of your pain. But I must warn you, I can’t sort through *all* of your skills. That would take years.”

What? Wait, that doesn't sound good!

If my staple skills got deleted, my combat abilities would drop like crazy. I wanted to keep Sword King Mastery and Thunder Magic, if nothing else!

"Don't worry," said Aristeia. "I won't go deleting everything in sight."

But you just said you couldn't pick and choose...

"How should I put this? I can use the unknown system within you to select and optimize your skills."

You can interact with it?

"Yes. I can't make changes to it, but I can lump similar skills together and evolve them into their advanced forms."

Since the sheer quantity of my skills lay at the root of my problem, she needed to delete some and evolve others. Basically, she was doing what the P.A. did for me last time. In fact, she might even be using the system in the exact same way. That didn't sound so bad.

"Still," said Aristeia. "I won't be able to make any fine tuning. You'll be at the mercy of the system's own selections."

I see...

Without the P.A. around, I didn't have much faith in it.

"You'll end up with fewer useless skills clogging up your processing by the end of it. That said, I can't guarantee that all your staples will remain intact. I've never done this before, you see."

What do you think, Fran...?

Sounds good to me, she said.

But there's a chance that you might lose something important. Like Sword Mastery.

Then we'll just get it again. The most important thing is that you're okay.

Fran...

Her words lit a fire in my heart. If I ended up weaker because of this, all I had to do was get stronger again. If I lost some skills, I could get them again. If I wasn't in working condition, I couldn't do any of that.

“Just one more question,” said Fran.

“Yeah?”

“What happens when we get more skills?”

She was right. It sounded like this needed to be a routine thing.

“You’ll have to see me from time to time,” Aristeia agreed. “And do tell me if you discover anything new about Teacher. I’d like to help as much as I can.”

I...don’t suppose that’s just because you’re being nice.

“Well,” she said. “I must admit, I am deeply interested in you.”

I figured. Her eyes were glowing with curiosity. Still, I wasn’t one to look a friendly Godsmith in the mouth. It was nice to know that we could call on her for help—like knowing a world-renowned physician.

Either way, the good news was that I could keep fighting alongside Fran.

“All right,” Fran said. “We’ll come back when we need to.”

I leave my remodeling in your hands, I told Aristeia.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “They are very good hands.”

Chapter 2: Change and Evolution

A FEW HOURS had passed since Aristeia began her remodeling work. In the end, manipulating my unknown system wasn't so easy. Her eyes were closed in concentration, and she hadn't moved a muscle since she began. She really did have a superhuman ability to focus. Suddenly, she raised her head.

"That's the prep work done. Now, I can begin remodeling any time I want."

Aristeia wiped the sweat off her chin. She must be exhausted, especially because she hadn't eaten or drunk anything the last few hours, but she didn't seem worn out.

It's late, I said. How about we call it a day? Take a load off?

I peeked out the small window to find the sun had set. It was nighttime, but the room was so bright that I'd hardly noticed.

"I'm fine. I don't tire easily."

Wow.

She wasn't lying. I couldn't detect any weariness in her body.

"But you're right," she said. "We have much work to do. Perhaps a little break is in order..."

You must be tired, Fran.

"I'm fine," Fran said, although she was clearly exhausted.

We were involved in an intense battle barely a day ago. Her mind and her body were drained. She should really get some rest.

"Well, I certainly am. Rest with me a while," Aristeia said, despite having reassured us that she wasn't tired. She was worried about Fran, and fortunately, Fran couldn't read between the lines.

"Okay," she agreed.

"Very well," said Aristeia. "Then let's go upstairs."

"Can't we just rest here?"

"No eating in the workshop."

A true craftsman to the end. I wonder what would have happened if Fran had gotten hungry during my analysis and started eating. It could have broken Aristeia's focus, or maybe she would just have called the whole thing off.

"But..." Fran said, looking at me. She didn't want to leave me alone.

Don't worry, Fran. It doesn't hurt anymore. I'll be fine.

"But still..."

I don't need rest, but you do. You want to be well for when I'm fixed, don't you?

"Oh, you can take him with you," Aristeia said, picking me up. "Now that emergency repairs are out of the way, he can survive anything except an intense battle."

Why didn't she say so sooner?! We were having a moment!

"Here you go, Fran."

"Hm."

Fran took me in her hands and sheathed me on her back. It was really nice to be with her again. The custom scabbard that Garrus had made for her was as comfortable as home.

Yep, there's no place like being on your back, Fran.

"Hm. It's good to have you back, Teacher," Fran said. Her back really was as good as home to me now.

Aristeia chuckled and sighed. "Come on then."

"Hm."

She led us up the stairs to an exquisite—though surprisingly ordinary—second floor. Her living quarters were modestly furnished and looked like the interior of a villa. Even the walls were made of polished marble.

She led us into a room that, judging by the fine metal cutlery, must have been her dining room. It looked like it could seat ten people, and mithril peeked out from under the tablecloth. It was fitting that a Godsmith's furniture was made from precious metals.

There was already someone at the table—a giant of a man sat on a small chair. He looked quite funny as he chewed daintily on some fruit.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Not really,” said Aristeia. “I’m taking a break.”

“I see...”

“Make room, Stupid Ogre. Scoot.”

“R-right. Sorry about that.”

Was Urslars scared of Aristeia? He was certainly reserved around her. They seemed quite familiar with each other, but he was holding something back. He’d been so chummy with Kiara that it seemed strange. He wasn’t acting like the OGREkin we knew he was. Fran noticed it too, tilting her head in confusion.

“Do you hate each other?”

Despite all the skills we’d picked up, she’d never quite learned the art of subtle conversation.

Aristeia frowned, while Urslars just looked around awkwardly. Had Fran brought up something she shouldn’t have?

“We don’t hate each other,” Aristeia said at last, fighting through the awkwardness.

“Yeah,” Urslars agreed. “We don’t...”

“So, what gives?” Fran pressed.

They definitely didn’t want to talk about this, but Fran was ignorant of the tension in the room. And I wasn’t about to stop her. After all, I wanted to know too.

“Let’s just say that he was extremely foolish during our first meeting. I gave him an earful, and he’s been Stupid Ogre to me ever since.”

“An earful?” Fran asked.

“That’s right. What do you think he said when he first came to see me?” Aristeia asked, glaring at Urslars.

She was still angry. I could see it in her eyes. He must have made a terrible first impression.

“He said, ‘You Godsmiths can destroy Godswords, right? Destroy this thing for me.’ Seriously!”

“L-look,” said Urslars. “I admit I was being foolish.”

“You were being an absolute moron!” Aristeia shot back. “Even though Gaia was made by another Godsmith, the Godswords are like our children. And this idiot asked me if I could destroy one! Can you blame me if I wanted to crack his skull?”

“...”

Urslars rubbed his forehead in silence. Guess she wasn’t kidding about cracking his skull. After that, she’d set the bleeding OGREkin on his knees and lectured him for half the day. No wonder Urslars still didn’t know how to act around her.

“Once Gaia chooses a user,” said Aristeia. “It cannot be used by anyone else. Throw it away, and it comes back. It doesn’t have a will of its own, but...”

She explained the situation to me. Apparently, Gaia had an artificial soul, a little like the P.A. If it was separated from its user, it always managed to find its way back.

“I hated this thing back then,” said Urslars. “Why did it choose me?”

I understood where he was coming from. When the Godsword came knocking, he was already a Calamity Ogre. And the fact that he couldn’t get rid of the sword meant it would always be with him when Mad Ogre form triggered. Which made him capable of calamitous destruction. He couldn’t do anything about Mad Ogre Form, but he *could* find a way to get rid of the Godsword.

“I let a dragon swallow it once. Even threw it into a volcano...but it always found its way back.”

When he put it like that, the Godsword sounded cursed. That’s when he sought out Aristeia—but the Godsmith only busted his head and gave him a massive lecture.

“But I can live with it now,” Urslars said.

“Hmph.”

“I just hunt monsters in the wilderness, so I won’t hurt anyone...”

Urslars had accepted his Godsword, which was why Aristeia didn’t chase him out of her house as soon as he woke up. Still, there was too much water under the bridge for her to start acting nice toward him now.

“I still ended up causing you trouble, though,” he said.

“You didn’t kill Kiara,” Fran told him.

“I know. I wouldn’t be able to kill that woman if I tried. Do you mind if I ask...how did she die?”

“Hm.”

“I’ll give you the rundown,” Aristeia said, trying to be kind.

“No,” said Fran. “I want to.”

She hadn’t known Kiara for very long, but she respected her and wanted to honor her memory. And Fran was the only one who was actually there when she died. The least she could do was to tell the story. I supported her decision. After all, it was better than keeping her emotions bottled up.

In the end, the story she told of Kiara’s final moments was anything but tragic. She told Urslars exactly what she saw: how Kiara fought a powerful opponent and died a warrior’s death. Once she’d finished, Urslars didn’t seem so gloomy. In fact, he was smiling.

“So, the old cat put the rest of her life into one fight and went out with a smile... I have to say, I’m jealous.”

I would never fully understand these combat junkies, but I knew what he meant. Kiara had died on the battlefield after a satisfying fight. The way that Urslars was now, there was no way that he could do the same. If he was ever in a fight to the death, Mad Ogre Form would trigger. And while he may die valiantly in the aftermath, he would have no say in it.

“I don’t understand,” Aristeia said. “But I cannot imagine Kiara dying in the palace, surrounded by her students.”

I guess she knew Kiara too. And she was right on the money.

“Exactly,” Urslars agreed.

“A sword is made for battle...and for the warriors who fight on that battlefield. I think she was happy to die that way. Maybe one day, I’ll understand it.”

Aristeia didn’t get it, but she didn’t pretend to.

After that, they went on eulogizing Kiara and telling stories about her life. Their accounts weren’t detailed, but it did help to paint a clearer picture of her life. After what seemed like an endless number of

stories, Aristeia noticed the time.

“Looks like I got a little carried away there. Let’s get some food.”

“Mind if I have some?” Urslars asked.

“Fine. Just for today.”

“I wanna eat too,” said Fran.

“Of course,” said Aristeia, getting to her feet.

Fran and Urslars kept talking, until they finally noticed that Aristeia hadn’t left the room.

“Who’s cooking?”

“My golem. I made one that can cook.”

A cooking golem? I’d never seen one of those before.

“Is the food good?” Fran asked.

“It’s...edible,” Aristeia said, refusing to look either of them in the eye.

Judging by the grimace on Urslars’ face, the food wasn’t great. Even Fran was sharp enough to pick that up.

“It’ll take too long anyway,” she said. “Have this instead.”

Fran took out a pot of curry and placed it on the table.

“You store food with Timespace Magic as soon as it’s made? That’s useful.”

“Hm,” said Fran. “Then I can have the ultimate cooking whenever I want.”

“It *does* look delicious.”

“This is curry. The ultimate food.”

She took out a pot of rice and set it next to the curry, along with some deep dishes.

“You use this plate,” she said. “Here. Watch.”

“I’m not a fan of the color, but it smells great. Can I have some?”

“Of course. Put these on top. Then it’s perfect.”

Fran took out some toppings that she’d taken a liking to recently: pickles from Bulbola (which looked like *fukujinzuke*), crispy fried onions, and a boiled egg.

Aristea followed her instructions and lifted her spoon suspiciously. She didn't tell us what she thought of the curry, but after her first spoonful, she immediately scarfed down the rest of her plate, so I guess she liked it.

Fran and Jet soon joined in, and the dining room was filled with the sounds of munching curry and clanging silverware.

Five minutes later, the whole pot was empty. More impressive than that was the fact that Fran had shared her monster meat curry with Urslars and Aristea. She must *really* like them.

Urslars gave his stuffed stomach a hearty smack. He wasn't exactly a paragon of good dining etiquette, and I really hoped that Fran wouldn't imitate him. Meanwhile, Jet finished his sumptuous dinner and burped.

"That was nice," said Aristea. "I don't remember the last time I had something so delicious."

"Me too," Urslars agreed. "Where'd you get it?"

He thought she'd got it from a restaurant.

"Teacher made it."

"Did he, now?" said Aristea.

"Who's this Teacher person?" Urslars said. "Is he Fran's master?"

Can I tell him? she asked, glancing at me. She had taken a liking to Urslars, and I wasn't about to deny her.

If you want to, it's fine by me.

"Hm. Teacher."

"Uh-huh...? What's with the sword?"

Urslars tilted his head in confusion as Fran brandished her sword. After all, she didn't seem to have any desire to fight him.

Hi, I'm Teacher. Fran's Intelligent Weapon.

"Wha...? Did the sword just talk?"

Urslars almost fell out of his seat. Apparently, owning a Godsword didn't prepare him for a talking one. Fran and Aristea explained everything, and after the obligatory poke at my odd name, he looked at me with great interest. Still, he didn't stay bewildered for very long. Guess he wasn't a Godsword user for nothing.

“I see,” he said. “So, *you’re* the one who took Mad Ogre Form from me.”

It’s probably temporary.

“Like I told Fran, I still owe you big time. Give me a holler if you ever need help, you hear?”

Mad Ogre Form must’ve been a greater burden than we thought.

Do you mind if we look at your Godsword? I asked.

“Gaia? Sure, go crazy.”

Urslars placed his greatsword on the table. When it unleashed its true potential, it became Land Sword Gaia. But for now, it was Earth Sword Gaia, its ordinary state. It looked like a barbaric greatsword—with a long leather-bound grip and a plain, unceremonial scabbard. The blade was straight, like Western swords, and around thirty centimeters at its widest point. It looked more like a bludgeoning weapon than a cutting one, but it was still plenty intimidating. Although it looked like an ordinary greatsword at first glance, a closer inspection showed that it was anything but.

Looking at it, I felt utterly defeated. Maybe it was the sword part of me talking, but I knew I was in the presence of a superior blade. In the end, I was still a *pseudo*-Godsword. Gaia was the real deal, and the difference was staggering.

“Teacher...will surpass this one day.”

Fran?

“Just you wait!”

It pained her to admit defeat, but she was still motivated. I was so happy that she believed in me.

You’re right!

“We’ll have to get him back to fighting shape, then,” said Aristeia.

“Hm! Yes, please!”

I’m in your hands.

I felt my spirits lift. I was still worried about losing my skills, but I needed to get it over and done with, so that I could get back to fighting.

“I think that’s enough of a break,” Aristeia said, giving Fran a gentle look. “Back to the workshop.”

“Hm!”

Ten minutes later, I was lying on the workbench again. Aristeia prepared another batch of potions, then laid her hands on me.

“I am about to begin the procedure,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Yeah.

“Hm,” Fran agreed.

As she began, I felt the mana flow through my blade. Once I was primed, the magic circle on the workbench started to glow. I could feel something rising within me. And then, a slight pain.

Urgh...

It felt hot. Like I was burning up from the inside. Or like something was crawling through my metal. It felt like my blade was bubbling.

Gah!

“Teacher!”

...!

I tried to reassure Fran, but I couldn’t. The pain was immense. Mana roared through my body like a flood. Something was changing. I was being remade. I felt like I was losing myself, but something told me that, while I would change, I would still be the same.

Evolution.

That was the first word that came to mind.

Maybe that’s why I wasn’t afraid. I was almost looking forward to it. This was necessary. I just had to put up with this blade-shattering pain.

Aaaaaaargh!

Although I wouldn’t mind if it hurried up a little!

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

“... ”

“..... ”

“.....”

Where was I?

What was I doing?

I couldn't remember...

I felt light. Like I was floating in a sea of hot water, or falling from a great height. Which was it, floating or falling? Maybe it was both. An odd sensation spread throughout my body.

What was I now? A man? A sword?

I could be either, if I put my mind to it. But instead, I drifted through this strange space, never quite deciding.

Finally, I heard something.

“...”

What was that?

A low rumble seemed to shake this strange place. Was it lightning? The roar of an animal?

“...”

No, it was a voice. It wasn't forming words, but it was coming from below me. At least, that's how it felt—although I wasn't sure if this place even *had* up and down.

I flung my consciousness downward and saw something black. I don't think it was there before...

“...!”

I'm not sure how, but I knew this thing was the source of that voice. Whatever it was, it was as large and deep as the netherworld. It appeared to be some kind of animal, but it didn't feel that way. Either way, it wasn't inanimate. I didn't know if it was intelligent, but it *definitely* had a will.

I stared and stared at it, but I still couldn't figure out what it was. Did it possess a physical body? Or was it some kind of spirit? The only thing that was certain was its presence.

“...!”

I winced as the thing called out to me. Did it know I was

watching?

Anger, resentment, hunger, hatred, envy, contempt.

I still couldn't hear its words, but I knew it was filled with negative energy. It was evil, yet afraid. Regretful, yet blasphemous. Teary, yet hateful. That's how it felt. It appeared to be fixed in place and could only scream into the silence of these strange depths.

"..."

I tried to descend to get a closer look...

"Not a step closer."

Huh?

Wait!

Who was that?

I didn't know what to do, but somehow, I was still descending. Slowly but surely, I sank toward the black thing.

"Turn back! Think about the bonds you've forged!"

I turned around and...noticed something on my back. A glowing blue rope.

Immediately, I stopped falling.

"You don't have to think about that thing. It can't do anything bad like this."

I could hear another voice. It wasn't the black thing. It sounded reasonable and reassuring. But who was it? I felt like I'd heard their voice somewhere before.

"Just don't go anywhere near it."

The voice was clear about that. I tried talking back to them, but they couldn't hear me. They sounded so familiar, but I couldn't work out why.

I couldn't think straight. Who was that? And this rope...

When I looked closer, the rope turned out to be a beam of light. I tried to touch it, but my hand went right through. Still, the light was warm and reassuring. Mysterious, yet familiar. What was it...?

As I focused on that light, I slowly lifted away from the black thing. But where was the light taking me? As soon as I thought of that,

Fran's face flashed through my mind.

Fran.

Fran was at the other end of this light.

Then everything was fine. Somehow, as soon as I knew that we were still connected, I felt a blessed assurance.

And then...

My consciousness...faded.

< Sleep now. >

What?

< All will be well when you wake. >

The P.A.?

“.....”

“.....”

I awoke to a remarkable silence. It was several seconds before I noticed that my scream had faded in the stillness.

Is it over...?

I didn't know how much time had passed, but the pain was completely gone.

Is it really over? I asked again.

It didn't hurt. I wasn't tired, and it didn't feel like there was anything wrong with me. In fact, I felt the best I had in ages. The only thing off was my sense of time.

How long was I screaming in pain? It was pitch-black outside, so it must have been at least several hours. Was I dreaming? I couldn't remember for the life of me.

At least a day must have passed.

My memory was hazy, but it definitely felt like a long time. If it had only been a few minutes, I'd be genuinely worried.

Where's Fran?

She was right next to me, leaning on the workbench and fast asleep. But she wasn't sleeping peacefully. She must be worried sick.

There were bags under her eyes, and her hair was disheveled. It looked like she hadn't taken a bath in days. I could lie here forever, just listening to the rhythm of her breath, but I should probably let her know I was okay.

I patted her head with Telekinesis. I was a little worried about using it, but it activated without pain or lag. If anything, it was working better than before. Was that because I felt so refreshed?

Fran? Fran.

No problems with Telepathy either. The remodeling must've gone smoothly.

I called out to Fran and gently shook her awake.

Wake up, Fran.

"Hnh."

Her eyes squinted open and she rubbed them, as if making sure that I was really there, floating in front of her.

"Teacher...!"

Whoa!

She threw her arms around me, and I immediately transmogrified myself. That worked perfectly too. I was used to doing it of course, but I'd had no idea if it still worked.

"I'm not dreaming, am I...?" Fran asked.

Nope. I'm Teacher in the flesh. Erm, steel.

"Hm...hm!"

Fran was very intense tonight.

She hugged me tighter, and her shoulders started shaking.

"Thank the gods..."

Her voice was trembling too.

Looks like I worried you.

"Hm...like you couldn't imagine."

I see. Sorry about that.

"Hm."

Fran clung on to me, tears rolling down her face while I stroked

her back and head. Eventually, she calmed down and loosened her hold. Now it felt more like she was leaning on me. She nuzzled against me, purring like a kitten.

Someone's a little needy today.

"Hm..."

Fran?

"Zzz."

Aaaand she's asleep again...

I knew she was terrible in the morning, but to fall right back to sleep like that? I guess Fran would be Fran.

Fran? Hello?

"Let her be," Aristeia said.

She was sitting across from us. Her hair was similarly disheveled, and she had bags under her eyes too. It looked like she'd pulled an all-nighter.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Great, actually. Telepathy and Telekinesis work great. And I feel excellent!

"Good." She yawned. "Very good."

You look tired too, Aristeia.

She wasn't as worn out as Fran, but she was still blinking to stay awake.

"After five days without sleep, even my body gets worn out."

Excuse me, did you say five days?

"Yes. I see you didn't know. Tonight is the fifth night since I started the remodeling ritual. I had to stay up in case something went wrong."

Seriously...? That long?

I'd thought we were still on the same day...

"Well, given the state you were in, I don't blame you for not knowing."

So, Fran...

“Didn’t sleep a wink the whole time. She stayed by your side. Be nice to her when she wakes up. She finally gave out about three hours ago.”

Sleepyhead Fran stayed up for five whole days? No wonder she was almost delirious! I kept stroking her head, moving her to the floor while she clung to me. After all, a body pillow does a worried heart good. She definitely looked more peaceful now. Sweet dreams, sweetheart.

So, is the remodeling work done? I asked.

“Who knows?”

I was kind of hoping you would...

That wasn’t very reassuring, but Aristeia didn’t seem to be kidding. She watched me with deep interest.

“That was my first time remodeling anything. Mind if I ask you some questions?”

Go ahead...

“Does it still hurt?”

No. Like I said, I feel amazing.

“That makes one of us. I feel like crawling into my bed and dying.”

Really sorry about all this.

“I’m kidding. The last time I made a Godsword, it took me ten days without rest. I’m still running on half a tank.”

I knew forging a Godsword was difficult, but ten days without sleep sounded like an ordeal. No wonder Godsmiths had Prime Physique.

“You don’t look any different to me,” said Aristeia.

You don’t think so?

It felt like my body had changed, so I assumed I’d look different. But I guess not.

I was remodeled, right?

“That’s what I’d like to know. How are your skills? Was the compounding successful? Are you more efficient now?”

Hang on, I haven't checked.

I was scared, to be honest. But I'd have to look sooner or later. I suppressed my optimism and, trembling with fear, Identified myself.

If nothing else, I really hoped I'd kept Sword King Arts, Thunder Magic, and Timespace Magic.

Bwuh?

I was bewildered enough to make a dumb noise. As messed up as I was, I still knew my own stats.

This is...quite the difference.

My appearance might not have changed, but my race had.

Name: Teacher

User: Fran (Exclusive)

Race: Unique Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 1182; MP: 9500/9500; Durability: 9500/9500

Mana Conductivity: S+

Evolution: [Rank 15; Crystal: 0/12000; Skill Capacity: 50; EP: 0]

Skills: Identify 10; Identity Protection; Transmogrify; Rapid Self Repair; Telekinesis; Telepathy; Timespace Magic 10; Skill Sharing; User Status Up (Medium); User Recovery Up (Small); Heavensight; Seal Immunity; Monstrology; Mage; Stealth Evolution; Chaos God's Grace; Wisdom God's Grace

I'd always been a regular Intelligent Weapon, but now I was a Unique Intelligent Weapon. Did that mean I was one of a kind? Or just strange? I didn't know the answer. Either way, I was more powerful now. Was that because of the race change? My Attack had increased by 300, and MP and Durability were both up by 3,000. Mana Conductivity had gone up two tiers, from S- to S+.

But my Evolution was an absolute mess, and my crystals and EP were at zero. I'd expected my crystal count to drop to nothing since I'd lost control and pushed myself beyond my limits with Unleash Potential, but I'd hoped for some EP as recompense, if nothing else.

After all, when the P.A. compounded my skills last time, they were turned into EP. Although I guess that my current circumstances were different. Either way, it couldn't be helped.

The real shocker was my skill list. Some of my skills were just gone. Telekinesis Up (Small), Attack Up (Small), Durability Up (Small), and Skill Capacity Up (Medium) had all vanished. But my stats increase was more than enough to make up for it. Now that I thought about it, maybe that's what my skills had been converted into.

My most recent prize, Mad Ogre Form, was gone too. Still, I wasn't sad about that. I didn't need a skill that made me lose control without warning.

The biggest hit was to my skill capacity. I only had fifty now, less than half of my original capacity, and couldn't equip as many skills as I used to. It was unfortunate, but it was the only way to save my processing power. Even if I never used a bunch of skills, equipping them clogged up my processes. I could only hope that I still had usable skills left in my memory bank.

And with that, it was time to find out. I examined the skill list apprehensively and was relieved to discover that it wasn't empty.

Oh, thank God...

There were no major changes to my Combat and Magic Skills. Sword King Mastery and Arts were still there, and my spells remained untouched.

However, there were some slight changes. Skills like Spear King Mastery Earth and Bow King Mastery Earth had increased in level, but I couldn't work out why. They hadn't leveled up, even after fighting all those bow-using Fiends and monsters, so why now?

Hmm...

"Problem?"

It's more of a puzzle, really.

I explained it all to Aristeia.

She nodded. "Maybe the processing overload weakened this other soul inside you and stopped them from accessing the vestiges of Cherubim. That might be why he couldn't give you as much power."

So, all the latent power I'd accumulated had finally transferred

after the remodeling? I guess my processing speed wasn't the only thing that was fixed. It had affected something deeper inside me too.

Most of my non-combat skills were gone. Things like Drawing, Musical Instrument, Grooming, and Enhanced Scales were either useless or impossible to use, and they hadn't made the cut. It really was very similar to what happened when the P.A. compounded my skills back on the sky isle.

Uh-huh.

"Would you mind trying out your skills?" Aristeia asked.

Oh, yeah, I should do that now. Hold on...

I looked up Fire Magic in my memory bank and equipped it.

All right, I can use it.

I cast Torch using No Cast, and a small orb of light hovered in front of me. It felt about the same as before, but my skill precision was a little iffy, and Telekinesis felt different. Perhaps my increased mana was improving its effectiveness. Smoother mana flow meant that I needed less mana to achieve the same result. So, Telekinesis was more sensitive than I was used to, and I was just going to have to get used to it.

"Well?"

I'll need some practice before I can get back to where I was.

The same thing had happened with my Sense Skills. They delivered more information now, which meant that they were more difficult to control.

"You just underwent some radical changes," said Aristeia. "It will take some time to get used to it."

Then I need to learn as fast as I can. In battle, a millisecond can make the difference between life and death.

I might be stronger, but my actual combat performance could have decreased. I needed to remedy that immediately.

"You have your work cut out for you," said Aristeia.

You can say that again.

The last change I could see was Blessing Skills. Two of them, in fact...

I'd been half-expecting Chaos God's Grace. After all, I *was* her servant. The skill increased my affinity with Chaos and gave me a high level of Chaos resistance. But what *was* Chaos power? Was it the same as Chaos Magic? I asked Aristeia, but she had never heard of it.

What a weird skill.

"Maybe you'll get stronger in dungeons," she suggested, "since they're the domain of the God of Chaos."

Which leaves the question of how I got Wisdom God's Grace.

Maybe it was the P.A. The skill allowed me to train spells more quickly, which probably meant that my Magic Skills would level up faster from now on. That would be a lot of help.

Of course, I was still grateful for the grace of the Chaos God. And I was *definitely* not just saying that to avoid her smiting me.

"What is it, Teacher?" Aristeia asked.

N-nothing. Just coming up with excuses for myself...

"?"

So, all my unnecessary skills had been pruned away or compounded into something else. It was quite refreshing, but as satisfied as I was, it felt a little lonely. I'd spent a lot of time collecting those skills.

Aristeia frowned. "I'm not sure whether I should consider this a success..."

Wh-what do you mean? It all worked out, didn't it?

"I'm not sure. You still have more skills than I thought you would."

She was right... I was so attracted to my enhancements that I forgot the whole purpose was to reduce my skill count and lighten my processing load.

"You still have more than a hundred. Do you feel any pain or discomfort?"

N-not for the moment...

It didn't hurt when I used my skills either.

"Let me analyze you again."

Go for it.

I lay in Fran's slumbering arms while Aristeia began her analysis. This time, she knew what she was looking for, so the whole thing went much faster. A few minutes later, Aristeia's eyes widened in surprise.

H-how do I look?

"My, my," she said. "You really *are* an interesting piece of work."

What exactly had she seen?

"The mysterious soul and unknown system have linked with the vestiges of Cherubim," she said. "That must be what's compensating for your lack of processing power."

So, my other parts are making up for the damage done to the P.A.?

"One more thing," she said. "The flow of power inside you may have changed."

What do you mean?

"Put simply, your physical growth has been greatly reduced, in order to make more room for processing power. The next time you rank up, you probably won't get much in the way of stats."

Wait, really?

I'd been so happy to see my Damage blow through a thousand... but apparently, it might not grow much further.

"But in return," said Aristeia. "Your skills should be far more effective. You didn't lose your physical growth for nothing."

Hmm... I guess using our skills better will help Fran.

My power no longer lay in sheer physical strength, but in my myriad skills. The fact that my physical growth had been nerfed was genuinely disappointing, but being able to use my skills more effectively was more than enough consolation. Besides, it wasn't like my growth rate was nuked to zero.

"Looks like your insides are far more fluid than I initially imagined," said Aristeia. "I didn't think your other soul could change so much."

Will I be okay? What if the stress just falls on this unknown system and the mystery soul instead of me this time?

"Can't say. They'll definitely be affected, but as for what will

happen? We can only wait and see.”

You don't have any predictions?

“No.”

I was still a bundle of mysteries, but at least the most pressing danger had passed.

Am I better than before, at least?

“Yes. You're certainly not as taxed as you were.”

I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens.

The remodeling was a success, and I had more processing power now. I was stronger too. Although, to be honest, I was just happy to be back in Fran's arms.

Aristea sighed. “Well, I'm exhausted. Let's get some dinner.”

Fran? Wake up, Fran.

Fran mumbled.

Nope, not happening.

She'd been watching over me for a long time, so I should probably just let her sleep. I'd have to find a way to carry her.

Jet, are you awake?

“Woof!”

You look...really well.

“A-arf?”

Jet was fully rested and annoyingly upbeat.

I'm putting Fran on your back. Carry her upstairs.

“Woof!”

I placed Fran on his back with Telekinesis, and she stayed fast asleep as he carried her upstairs. I held her in position as Jet brought her into the dining room. The rocking didn't seem to bother her in the slightest.

When we got there, Urslars was already waiting for us. He seemed surprised at the state Fran was in, but I guess she *was* riding a direwolf while fast asleep.

“You're done?” Urslars asked.

“For now,” Aristeia said. “Pass me those?”

“Have at it,” he said. “It’s your house...”

Aristeia munched on a bowl of nuts, but she wasn’t satisfied. She rubbed her stomach, looking for something else to eat.

“Guess I’ll get the golem to make something.” She paused. “But then again...”

What?

“That dish called curry. It was very good.”

...

“Don’t suppose I could have some for payment for five days and nights worth of hard work?” she asked.

All right, I get it. Coming right up.

I was genuinely thankful for all her work and didn’t mind forking over some curry as payment.

Here.

Aristeia beamed. “Such a delicious smell! I can feel it reverberating right to my stomach!”

“...”

Now Urslars was the one staring. His gaze could’ve drilled a hole right through my blade. Fran looked at me the same way when she was hungry. In the end, I fed him too.

“This is really good.”

“Yeah. I’d love to have this every day.”

“Woof!”

Jet dug in too. He couldn’t resist the allure of curry. Soon, his mouth was dripping with it, and I was feeling quite annoyed. He hadn’t done anything during the five nights that Fran was worried sick.

Hmph.

Jet whimpered as I yanked his tail.

At the same time, Aristeia and Urslars were causing a huge dent in our curry supply. I hoped Fran wouldn’t get too upset. She was still fast asleep on the sofa, although her nose was twitching. Then eyelids began to flutter.

“Curry,” she mumbled.

E-everyone’s tucking in.

“I...food...now...”

She’d only been asleep for an hour, and her brain’s language center was still foggy. I was honestly pretty amazed that she could react to the smell of curry in her sleep. I prepared a plate for her, but she still wouldn’t get up.

Fran?

“Curry...”

She was just too exhausted. Her body was telling her to sleep, but her mind was reminding her there was curry.

Oh, well.

“Hunh?”

Come on.

I sat her up with Telekinesis and guided a spoonful of it into her mouth. She munched, swallowed, then opened her mouth again like a baby bird. I didn’t mind. She was so cute right now, and telekinetic spoon-feeding was quite fun. In the end, even though she was barely awake, she managed to finish three plates.

“You’re very skilled with Telekinesis, Teacher.”

“So *that’s* how you manage to cook.”

Urslars and Aristeia were very impressed. I guess they’d been puzzling over how a sword could cook anything.

Aristeia burped. “That was good eating.”

“It’s been four days since I had anything decent,” Urslars said. “Thanks.”

You’re welcome.

When they’d finished, we kept on talking.

Did anything happen while I was out? I asked.

“You mean with the war?”

That’s my main concern, yeah. Fran would be sad if the beastmen lost.

“I don’t know, I’m afraid,” Aristeia apologized. “News doesn’t travel my way.”

We weren't exactly in the middle of the country. If she wanted to know the latest developments, she'd have to send a messenger. And besides, she'd been too busy keeping watch over me. Meanwhile, Urslars didn't seem the type to keep up with that sort of thing. If anything, I was surprised he was still here.

Do you have an appointment with Aristeia? I asked.

"What do you mean?"

Well, you've been here for five days.

Urslars gave a dry chuckle. Perhaps I shouldn't have asked. He must've wanted to thank me first. He might be a big man, but he was still a gentleman.

"Like I said, I owe you," he said. "I couldn't leave without saying anything."

Which reminds me, how's the Mad Ogre situation?

"It's back. But I'm not fighting right now, so I don't need to worry so much."

It had only been a few days, but it was back. I had hoped the skill had gotten lost during my remodeling, but it seemed that as long as Urslars was a Calamity Ogre, it would always return to him.

"Oh, I wanted to talk to you about Fran's equipment," said Aristeia.

Yes, I was about to ask you that.

In place of her usual Black Cat set, Fran was wearing some very loose-fitting pajamas. They probably belonged to Aristeia, and the sleeves and legs were rolled up to accommodate Fran's small frame. If she hadn't rolled them up, they would have looked quite charming. And these pajamas were as tough as leather armor. It was probably enough to protect from the knife of an ordinary burglar.

What happened to the Black Cat set?

"First, let me compliment its maker by saying that it's a very good set of armor. However, all the battles are taking their toll. Don't tell me you didn't notice its reduced self-repair capabilities?"

Wait, really?

Our last battle was actually a string of intense battles. Fran's armor could repair itself, but it was already damaged before it had the

chance. That's probably why I didn't notice.

As a magic sword, I knew that even enchanted gear had its limits. I'd overtaxed my processing power until it was shot, and the same applied to manatech. The more you used them, the more they decayed.

"I'm in the middle of repairing...no, *remodeling* it," said Aristeia. "Honestly, I think you only survived that battle because you got stronger."

The enemies we were fighting now were far stronger than the ones we'd faced when Fran first got the Black Cat set. Safe to say that was going to keep happening. As a Godsmith, Aristeia knew that Fran's armor wouldn't last against our future opponents.

"I talked to Fran about it, and she gave me the go ahead. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to override the original blacksmith's plan for it...but I'd rather apologize to him than see you end up dead. You're seeing him soon, right?"

I felt bad for Garrus, but I wasn't about to refuse a Godsmith's offer to upgrade our gear. Fran probably knew that it was in bad form to let another blacksmith upgrade her armor, but she'd taken that into consideration already.

All right, I'll apologize to Garrus for you.

"Thanks. I'm ready to start remodeling. If I start today, I should be finished by the day after tomorrow."

That's really kind of you, but are you sure? You haven't slept in five days.

"I'm fine. I can go ten days without sleep, remember? Besides, I regularly stay awake for seven days in a row."

Well, then, we're in your care.

"I'll craft you the best gear yet."

She got up to leave right away. She really was nice to us. Of course, she'd never measure up to Fran, but I'd started to think of her as a friend. It got me wondering about whether I should still be hiding things from her. The guilt I felt suggested that it wasn't. Still, I couldn't tell Aristeia without Fran's knowledge. I'd just have to talk to her when she woke up.

A few hours later, I explained the situation to Fran.

“Hm. Sure.”

Well, that was easy.

She agreed to my proposal right away.

“You want to tell her, don’t you?” Fran asked.

Well, yeah.

“Then go for it.”

I mean, it’s kind of a big secret...

But Fran thought it was mine to tell. I guess that *was* what I normally told her.

But my secrets are your secrets too.

“It’s all right. I don’t want to keep secrets from Aristeia either.”

I guess we agreed on this too.

You’re sure about this?

“Hm.”

Okay. Let’s go see her.

We made our way to the workshop and found Aristeia sitting down, wiping the sweat from her brow. It looked like we’d caught her in the middle of a break.

“Aristeia,” said Fran. “There’s something we want to tell you.”

“Oh? Did you figure out something about Teacher?”

It’s not that, but it might still be relevant.

Aristeia heard the serious tone in our voices and straightened up.

“Are you still keeping secrets from me?” she asked. “Even after all that analysis? You might have more secrets than a Godsword. How exciting!”

She looked at us with expectant eyes.

Okay, well...you might think I’m crazy, but...remember how I said I used to be human?

“How could I forget?”

Well, it’s true, but I didn’t come from this world. I came from somewhere else.

“What? You came from another world?”

Pretty much, yeah.

“Wait, so does that mean you came from the Godsource? Does it exist?!”

Aristea was surprised, but not in the way I expected. She seemed to accept the idea that I was from another world without question. But then, what was this Godsource she was talking about?

She explained that, before the gods created this world, they came from somewhere else. According to their myths, the gods were born in another world called the Godsource.

I don't know if that's where I come from. We don't have magic or skills back in my world.

“You don’t?” she said. “Then how do you make things?”

I explained that Earth’s civilizations and cultures had developed through the use of technology. Still, I was only a salaryman in my past life, so I could only give her the gist of it. She was a naturally curious person and asked me lots of questions. She took particular interest in how Earth compensated for its lack of skills with technology.

“How interesting! I could listen to you talk about this for hours!”

I'm almost disappointed that you believed me so easily.

“Well, I already knew about the Godsource. How could I not believe you?”

But you don't even know if it's real.

“I believe it is. I’m a Godsmith, after all.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“The Godsmiths are mentioned in our world’s creation story.”

Specifically, the part where the gods fought the Evil One. No matter how badly he was injured, the Father of Fiends kept regenerating. That was, until the Sword God summoned a piece of himself from the Godsource to stop him. Once the Evil One was defeated, the Sword God broke his sword into pieces and scattered them across the world to keep the Evil One sealed away. Then the gods commissioned the Godswords, so that humanity had a way to fight back if he ever returned. That’s when the first Godsmith created Alpha. Because of this fragmented story, the Godsmiths believed in the Godsource.

“That said, we don’t know where the fragments of this mythical sword are.” That information was lost to history. “But I digress. The point is, I believe in the existence of another world, and the people who live there. Of course, that doesn’t mean that *you* came from the Godsource...”

There might be more worlds out there that we don’t know about.

Earth was a bit vague on the existence of gods. All I knew was that magic and skills didn’t exist there.

“Still, this must be why you’re inside this sword. Can you think of any reasons why it might have happened?”

Not a one. It’s not like I had any special powers. I was an ordinary civilian. The only thing that makes me different is that I don’t come from here...

“I see... That’s too bad. Let me know if you find anything else.”

Of course.

If we ever found out more information, I’d love to talk to Aristeia about it.

Chapter 3: New Self

COME ON, Fran!

“Hm!”

The day after I woke from my remodeling, Fran and I decided to test me out.

“Haa!”

Good! That was great!

“Tsch!”

There!

I made a five-meter-wide boulder with Land Magic, and Fran split it clean in half. But she still wasn’t satisfied with the result.

“Not good enough...”

No?

“Hm. Not even close.”

I figured.

Charging me with mana was more difficult than before. When she held back, it wasn’t enough to use me properly, and when she didn’t, it was too much to be efficient. It was interfering with her skill control.

The Air Hop she’d just executed was terrible. She’d prepared to use two Air Hops, then cut the boulder vertically from above. But in the end, she did three. It threw her off balance and meant that she didn’t accelerate through the boulder so much as fall through it. When the first skill in the chain failed, it threw everything else off, and she couldn’t pull off the Pressurized Quickdraw.

I knew how she felt. It was very similar to when the P.A. compounded my skills. For a while, the advanced skills were harder to control, and it threw off my rhythm. Still, Fran had gotten used to it pretty quick back then, and I was confident she’d do the same thing now.

The problem was with me.

Because of my enhancements, Element Blade and the other spells I used to support Fran were too powerful. And I'd grown so strong so quickly that it was difficult to control them. My spells took too long to cast, and that impacted on everything else, so our other skills were mistimed too. On top of all of that, our practice boulder came out lopsided. I needed to get used to my current power level, and fast.

This is awful...

"Hm."

Fran might have a knack for picking things up quickly, but I was smack average. I needed a lot more practice.

But there were definitely some improvements. My mana circuits ran better, and now that my internals were fixed, simultaneous casting was cheaper. I could charge a single spell with more too, and so my maximum damage was increased. I was pretty sure I could pull off Murelia's altered Kanna Kamuy once I got a handle on things, but I hadn't tried it yet. After all, I was still recovering from the sword version of an illness.

"Again, Teacher."

All right!

We kept at it, using as many skills as we could. Sometimes, Fran accelerated with skills and spells to dodge my magic. Other times, she broke through the walls I set up, swinging with all her strength. We were getting better, but it still wasn't good enough. Eventually, Urslars came out of the mansion.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

Fran nodded. "Hm..."

She didn't even try to deny it.

"Hmph."

"...!"

Wha?!

Suddenly, Gaia was bearing down on us, dripping with murderous intent. Fran narrowly avoided the Earth Sword, which gouged a deep cut into the ground beside us. If we hadn't avoided it in time, that swing would've caused some serious damage.

What are you doing?!

“Nice dodge.” Urslars chuckled. “You couldn’t have done that if you didn’t use your skills properly.”

He...made a good point. When Fran realized what he was trying to do, she clapped her fist into her open hand. Urslars had created real danger to help us. It was the only way to get better. Just thinking about using our skills wouldn’t cut it.

“Training helps you get the hang of your skills, but real combat is the best teacher.”

I understood what he was getting at, but he could’ve at least given us a heads up! Still, Fran was nodding vigorously. She agreed with Urslars one hundred percent.

“Hm. Got it.”

“Great!” he said. “You won’t die with Teacher around anyway, right?”

He made his intentions clear, and Fran readied me in preparation.

Hey!

“Haaa!”

“Hngh!”

Before I could get a word in, they’d started their sparring match. These blood knights seemed to understand each other perfectly.



“Raaaagh!”

“Hmph!”

“That was good!”

Urslars attacked, and Fran dodged. Neither of them used spells, as though they’d come to the silent agreement to rely on melee for now.

The big man might look like he was swinging his sword wildly, but there was a method in his violence. I noticed that he sometimes used slow and deliberate attacks between a number of fast slashes, like he was laying a trap. If you dodged carelessly, he could predict your movements, and few could match his strength enough to block him. He could overpower any attempt to deflect, and ignoring it only gave Urslars an opportunity to close in. That’s how he threw his opponents off balance. All he needed was a moment’s opening for the Godsword to do its work.

“Ha ha ha! So you deflected it! Very good!”

“Barely. You okay, Teacher?”

That took a chunk of my durability, but I’m still good!

Fran only used me to deflect Gaia for an instant, but it was enough to do some serious damage. The striking difference in our strength didn’t do much to improve my spirits. The only reason Fran could keep up was thanks to her superior agility and sword mastery. That compensated for our difference in experience, strength, and weapon power. Although we were still on the defensive...

Still, we were holding our own against this beast of a man. He was an S-Rank adventurer, so the fact that we weren’t killed immediately was an achievement in itself.

“Taaaah!”

“Hurgh! There you go!” said Urslars. “That’s the way to do it!”

“Hngh!”

It wasn’t just his regenerative abilities that made him impressive. He was relentless. Pain Immunity stopped him from flinching at deep wounds, and Shockwaves did little to slow him down. For the fighting game fans out there, Urslars had perpetual super armor. He could keep attacking, even under heavy assault.

The two carried on sparring for a while, although I was starting to

wonder if you could even call it sparring. They knew that they could heal at the brink of death, and so neither of them held back. The only vague rule was “try not to kill each other.”

Still, Urslars was right: real combat was the best teacher. They’d both had to heal up many times already, and Fran’s movement was getting better. I’d initially panicked when she got hurt, but in the end, it made my healing more precise. It was a strange feeling, and this was only the beginning.

“All warmed up?” Urslars asked.

“Yep.”

“Good! Now we can get started!”

“Hm!”

And then they were off. They moved faster and struck harder, and now magic was an option too.

“Take this!” said Urslars. “Gravity Stomp!”

“Ugh!”

Fran sensed the danger and backed off quickly, as a large swathe of ground around Urslars sunk by several centimeters—like an invisible plate had pressed down on it. It didn’t seem to affect Urslars, probably because of the Land Magic Immunity on his Godsword. Fran managed to avoid it too, but the danger was far from over.

“Let’s see how you handle this,” he said.

“Hrm!”

Urslars slashed horizontally with his Godsword, while Fran brought me up to deflect.

“Huh?”

What’s going on?!

As soon as his attack landed, Fran started to float. She couldn’t believe her eyes, but I realized what was going on right away: he’d reduced her gravity until she couldn’t keep her footing. I didn’t detect any spells coming from Urslars, so it was probably Gaia’s latent power.

“Stone Spear!”

As we were blown away, huge shards of rock came flying at us, and all of them were charged with mana. Urslars might look like a

meathead, but he had some serious control and creativity with his spells.

“Oh?”

Fran Air Hopped out of the way, but her body was too light, and she put too much power on it. It was like walking on the moon, and Urslars was prepared for her mistake. He jumped up easily into the air. Yep, he could *definitely* manipulate gravity.

“Raaaah!”

That won't work this time!

Danger Sense warned me that nothing good would come from blocking his Godsword this time. If it could make things light, it could probably make them heavy, and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of that. Instead, I blinked away and got behind him.

“Yaaah!”

Fall!

Fran was used to this tactic and quickly moved to the right after the teleport—slashing her sword while I cast a Thunder spell.

“Raaagh!”

Urslars dissipated the dense field of electricity with his sword, but Fran wasn't perturbed. She cast a Wind spell to support her in midair, then used Vernier and Air Hop to charge Urslars's flank. She moved so fast that it looked like teleportation, but he was ready for it.

Take this!

“Teacher, now?! Ha ha!”

Just go down!

I fired a Flame spell at Urslars while he was preoccupied with Fran, but to no avail. He just calmly shot some boulders back at us.

Now this intense sparring match was peppered with spells. The longer this went on, the less either of them held back. We used more spells and powerful attacks, and I got so into it that I even fired off a Kanna Kamuy. Urslars had fired the first shot when he used gravity manipulation, so everything was fair game now.

It wasn't long before Aristeia's front yard was an absolute mess. Trees were toppled, grass was burnt, the ground had holes in it. But

Urslars didn't seem too worried about Mad Ogre Form. It had just reset, so maybe that's why he could fight at this intensity. That meant this might be our only chance to train with him. I was really grateful that he'd spend his precious lucid time with Fran like this.

"Ga ha ha! You're moving a lot better now!" he said.

"Tsch! You haven't seen anything yet!"

"Ha ha ha!"

And of course, he was very much enjoying himself.

Their sparring-match-come-all-out-war continued into the afternoon before they broke for a late lunch. As they ate, they discussed the fight.

"Looks like you're back to good form," Urslars said, munching on his food.

"Hm," Fran said, chewing along.

After a quarter of a day fighting with him, our skill usage had definitely improved. We still weren't quite where we needed to be, but at least we were good enough that we wouldn't mess up a skill in the heat of battle. We might still miscalculate our teleports, but depending on the encounter, that might even be beneficial. Our training had paid off. All we needed now was more experience.

Thanks. You really helped us out.

"I had fun," Urslars, smiling a bit through his food.

Was he being shy?

"Going out and hunting some monsters will do you the world of good," he said, one rice ball in his hand and another smeared all over his lips. Risking our life fighting monsters sounded like good training, but I was still worried. Didn't we need more training before we went out...?

"Teacher," said Fran. "We're going to kill monsters."

Don't you think it's too soon?

"Now."

Fran was completely on board. Well, I guess we could start with some weaker ones. If there were any goblins around, we could easily kill those.

As we discussed what kind of monsters to hunt, Urslars got up. He'd eaten twenty rice balls and his hunger was sated. He patted his stomach.

"I'll show you something cool before I go," he said.

"What?"

"You said Teacher was going to be stronger than a Godsword one day."

If Fran says so, I have to believe her.

"Hm. Teacher will be the best sword ever!"

Urslars gave her a savage smile, then took Gaia and pointed it at the sky.

"Behold the goal you seek!"

What was he doing?

"Godsword Release!" he bellowed.

Mana poured out of him into Gaia. There was so much that I could see it. And, with that, he unleashed Gaia's true power.

"Wow."

Whoa!

The shockwave rippled outward for ten meters. If I hadn't set up a barrier, we would've been blown away. And the winds blowing around Urslars were only getting stronger.

We were all right, but I wish he'd warned us first! Still, Fran's eyes were absolutely sparkling with excitement.

Within the storm of mana, Gaia transformed into the thing we saw in the dungeon—a cross between a greatsword and a battering ram. Even just standing near it was more intimidating than a maxed-out Menace Skill. Fran knew it wasn't hostile, but she took a step back all the same. The earth, air, and even the mana around us reverberated with the advent of Land Sword Gaia.

Identify still can't tell much...

Gaia was far stronger than me, so I couldn't see much information.

Name: Land Sword Gaia

Attack: 4700; MP: 20000; Durability: 30000

Mana Conductivity: SS +

Skills: --

But thanks to my remodeling, I *could* see its MP and Durability now. Hooray for progress!

And yet...this thing was monstrous. Its Attack, Magic, Durability...everything was so much stronger than me. This was a *true* Godsword. This was what I was trying to become, but the difference was so great that I could have cried. Still, Fran believed that I could transcend even this, so I had to keep my tears to myself. I carved the image of Gaia's absolute power into my mind, to make sure I never forgot my objective.

As we watched in silence, Urslars shouldered the Godsword.

"I'll show you some of Gaia's power," he said. "Burn it into your minds!"

Gaia glowed with a reddish-brown aura. The mana was so menacing, it was palpable.

"Haaaa!"

The ground shook, like Urslars was the epicenter of the earthquake.

"Watch this!" Urslars roared, jumping into the air.

He manipulated his own gravity and soared through the air, climbing a good thirty meters before he started crashing down. I knew his tricks, but it still made for a strange sight.

"Gravity Blow!"

By the time Urslars slammed Gaia into the ground, it was a whirlpool of mana. A massive crater formed around us—thirty meters wide and twenty meters deep. It appeared in an instant. Blink and you would've missed it, as Urslars landscaped the whole area in a single blow.

"Wow...!"

You can say that again.

If we'd been caught in that attack, we would've died. At best, we

might have been able to escape with a Dimension spell.

“I only used half its power, but I hope that was a good demonstration. Can’t go too crazy, now...”

So much destruction, and it was only at 50 percent power?! Godswords really were incredible, and I was glad he’d gone berserk in a dungeon where he couldn’t use his full strength. If it hadn’t been for that, we might not be standing here now.

Most terrifying of all was the fact that he didn’t even break a sweat. Guess he wasn’t kidding when he said it wasn’t at full power. Could he use that attack more than once in quick succession? Once again, I felt the size of the distance between us. No wonder he was an S-Rank adventurer. But we weren’t about to give up.

“This is a fraction of what you’re aiming for,” he reminded us.

“Great,” said Fran.

“Really?”

You heard the girl. I can’t quit once she sets her mind on something.

“As long as I have Teacher, we’ll catch up.”

And we had a *lot* of catching up to do. I had no idea how we’d do it, but at least we knew what we were aiming for now. As long as we were together, we could do it.

Just you wait.

“We won’t give up,” said Fran.

That’s when it happened.

“Uh, Teacher? Fran?” Urslars said, alarmed. “You’re...you’re glowing!”

“?”

Wait, this light...

“Huh. We are glowing.”

It’s the blue light...!

The same mysterious light that always came when we were fighting a powerful enemy. We shone with it together, united.

But we’re not even fighting...

< Fran’s contract status has been upgraded from Sword User to

Swordnited. >

The P.A.?! What's going on?

< ... >

Silence. Despite all the remodeling work, she still couldn't answer me.

"It's...gone," said Fran.

Yeah, but something seems to have changed between us. Although I have no idea what.

"We'll be fine," said Fran. "The light has always helped us."

That's true.

Fran was right. Whatever had happened, it didn't feel wrong. If anything, a warm bond had formed between us. We would be all right.

Urslars laughed. "So, you're okay? That's great!"

"Hm."

He ruffled Fran's hair. In fact, he did a real number on it, but Fran didn't seem to mind. Actually, she looked like she quite enjoyed it.

"Let's have another sparring match the next time we meet!" said Urslars. "I hope you'll be stronger by then."

Fran nodded enthusiastically. "Hm! We'll make you give it your all."

She was really serious about taking on at full strength. Personally, I didn't even want to see him like that. Maybe he was just saying it to encourage her. After all, Mad Ogre Form would probably stop him from sparring in the future.

"Well," said Urslars. "I have to get going."

That was sudden. He put Gaia back in its sheath and walked off. Not back toward Aristeia's mansion, but away from it.

"So soon?" Fran asked.

"Yeah. I'm not the type to stay in one place for too long."

I didn't need a skill to see that was the truth. The fear of losing control was always with him. The better he knew you, the less he wanted to be around you. If he hadn't sparred with Fran, he probably could have stayed longer. But it would be a waste of his favor to say

that to his face.

Fran waved goodbye, looking lonely. "Bye-bye."

See you around.

"Count on it!"

And so Urslars dashed away. He looked really cool doing it too. I felt like calling him "Boss" the next time we saw him.

"He's gone..."

Fran looked sad, but she soon regained her composure.

"Teacher, we have to get stronger."

Yeah.

With Urslars gone, we returned to the mansion and asked Aristeia if we could borrow one of her workshops to carve up our monster materials. We'd amassed a mountain of them in our last battle and, while it wasn't enough to fill Pocket Dimension to capacity, it was getting close. And there were *definitely* important materials hidden in all those remains.

I asked Aristeia if she needed any of them to help with Fran's upgrade, but she had it covered. I dared not ask how much her materials cost, but I'd have to talk to her about it when she was done. However, she did ask for a list of the materials we got, as she might have some use for it.

So, with the Godsmith's wish list in mind, I started carving up the strongest monsters. We wouldn't have time to carve all of the remains, and besides, Aristeia probably didn't need anything from the weaker ones. So the boss monsters from the horde took priority. I counted five so far: Graphite Hydra, Crimson Wolf, Steel Titanbear, Adamas Beetle, and the demon baron.

The Graphite Hydra was practically unusable after I blew it to pieces with Kanna Kamuy, and the Adamas Beetle and Illusion Magic-wielding demon were already carved up. After killing so many Fiends, I didn't feel too bad dissecting the humanoid demon. The fact that their blood and guts were completely inhuman helped too.

"What shall we do with this?" Fran asked.

Yeah, its fur is a mess...

She held up the C-Threat Crimson Wolf—the one Jet defeated after a tough battle. Its fur was patchy, its bones brittle, and its meat was starting to stink. Jet’s Deadly Venom Magic had really done a number on it, and there wasn’t much left that we could use.

Let’s just carve it up for now. There might still be something useful.

“Okay.”

I’ll get started on this one.

The Steel Titanbear was over ten meters long and took up over half of the workshop. I’d killed this one by breaking its crystal, so it was still in near-perfect condition.

This is gonna take a while.

But it had to be done. I flayed its skin away, carved the flesh, took its organs, and stored them all in our Pocket Dimension. I had the highest level of Disassemble and could move around freely with Telekinesis, but the job *still* took almost half an hour. It would have taken a normal adventurer half a day of back-breaking work.

It wasn’t the last of the strong monsters either. The Dragon Lizard was exactly what its name suggested, Dryad Lion was a wooden beast and used Wood Magic, and there was an assortment of High Ogres too. These weren’t exactly bosses, but they were at least D-Threats.

When Fran got tired, I carried on carving into the night. In the end, I managed to get through a good fifty specimens. Fran would be eating well thanks to all this meat!

After that, a sleepy Fran took me to Aristeia, and I asked if there was anything she could use.

“You finished carving?” she asked.

For the most part. Here’s the list.

I handed it over, and Aristeia calmly scanned through. For now, she seemed more interested in my carving skills.

“You did all that in one night?” she asked. “That’s very fast.”

I had help.

“You did most of the work,” Fran said.

You did at least a third of it, Fran.

“A third?” said Aristeia. “That’s still something. So, that’s the real

value of Skill Sharing.”

She kept scanning the list as she talked, then asked for the Crimson Wolf intestines and Steel Titanbear fangs, since she’d figured out a use for them.

All that’s left now are the crystals. Do you think I can absorb them again?

“I don’t know,” said Aristeia. “I patched up your other soul as best I could, but there’s only one way to find out.”

I figured.

“Just try not to do anything that makes it worse.”

“We’ll try absorbing some,” said Fran.

“Go for it.”

And so, the experiment began.

I started with a weaker monster, a Big Rat. I carved it up quickly and floated its crystal over to my blade. As it disappeared, it turned into mana.

“Well?” Aristeia asked.

So far, so good...

“Glad to hear it.”

Let’s try a Fiend next.

“This one?”

Fran took out the crystal of a Hobgoblin Lancer, one of the Valkyrie’s soldiers. There was a chance that this might place undue stress upon the mystery soul. After all, Aristeia said that he couldn’t process Malice. That was why I couldn’t get much power from them.

Do it, I said.

“Hm.”

Fran pressed the crystal against my blade, and I quickly absorbed it. It didn’t give as much as other monsters of similar strength, but I didn’t feel sick. It was business as usual.

“Well?” Aristeia asked.

Not much difference. Although I think I feel slightly more satisfied.

“I see. Let me inspect you.”

Aristea touched my blade and began her analysis.

“I think you are more deeply connected to this other soul since the remodeling.”

What about the skills I’m getting back?

I’d lost Dig during the remodeling, but now it was back. It looked like my skill and mana gains were back to normal, but I wasn’t sure if I should be happy about that.

Dig came back.

“So, you *can* regain erased skills by absorbing more crystals.”

After everything we went through to get rid of them, I don’t think this is a good thing.

“Hmm,” said Aristea. “Hang on.”

She analyzed me again, and we continued the experiment with a crystal from a Hobgoblin Archer, which contained many abilities. We had other goblin crystals to try out if that didn’t work, but fortunately, I got Carpentry on my first try.

Well?

“Hmm...you can take on more skills now,” said Aristea. “I think the remodeling has turned you into a skill specialist.”

“Which means?” Fran asked.

“That he can hold anything from 120 to 150 skills in total. Not that I would recommend it...”

That’s good news.

I was worried about getting swamped again.

“Still, you should come and see me before you hit this limit. Don’t take on too many at once.”

All right. I guess that means I’ll have to go through remodeling again...

“You’ll have to get used to it, I’m afraid,” said Aristea. “But if you get rid of your skills regularly, then I don’t think it will be as severe.”

Let’s hope so.

Under Aristea’s watchful gaze, I continued absorbing crystals. That way, she could help right away if anything went wrong. In the end, I got 2,203 points from 100 crystals. That gave me fifteen new

abilities, and Dig and Carpentry both rose to Level 2. The Fiends probably used these skills to move around a dungeon.

Then everything was done, and I was still fine. I was back to normal.

But I have a long way to go before my next evolution.

We decided to leave the next day.

Thanks for everything.

“We owe you a lot.”

“Woof.”

We stood in front of Aristeia’s mansion and bowed our heads to her. If she hadn’t taken us in, we probably wouldn’t be smiling right now. We might not have known her long, but she’d taken good care of us.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I learned a lot. I hope to see you again soon.”

Are you sure this is all you wanted for upgrading Fran’s armor?

“Yes. I enjoyed her reaction much more than the gold.”

Aristeia must have used Godsmith-tier materials to make those upgrades. And that’s before we even *started* to talk about my remodeling. Her work was priceless. It had to be worth at least several trillion gold, but she didn’t seem interested in taking payment. Instead, she said that the chance to analyze a talking sword was payment enough.

Still, that didn’t sit well with me, so I insisted. Eventually, she’d relented and said, “All right, fine. You’ve already given me some materials, so throw in a million gold and we’ll call it even.”

The way she said, you’d think a million gold was a pittance.

“I would also like a pot of curry,” she added.

So, I took out our biggest pot of curry. Fran protested, saying that she’d rather part with all our money and materials, but she backed down when I told her we could make more. We just needed to buy some more spices first. Still, even taking all the labor and ingredients into account, an industrial pot of curry barely cost ten thousand gold. I

would've given Aristeia the recipe, but she couldn't cook. And her golem could only cook things if it had the data for them.

"Thanks for the armor," said Fran.

"I only improved an already excellent design."

We're really glad you worked on it. It's as cute as it is powerful.

Fran's Black Cat set had evolved. Its name and shape had changed, and it was good as new. The changes were even more drastic on the inside. Each piece had increased its Defense by fifty, taking the total from 350 to 650. It also had an extra two hundred in Durability, and its effects were improved.

Name: Black Sky Tiger Armor

Defense: 150; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Deep Sleep; Deodorant; Cleanse; Mental Abnormal Status Resistance Up (Large)

Name: Black Sky Tiger Gloves

Defense: 150; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Shockwave Resistance Up (Large); Strength Up (Medium)

Name: Black Sky Tiger Boots

Defense: 115; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Jump; Agility Up (Medium)

Name: Black Sky Tiger Earring

Defense: 65; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Sonic Resistance (Large); Elemental Resistance (Large)

Name: Black Sky Tiger Cloak

Defense: 135; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Cold Resistance; Heat Resistance; Self-Repair

Name: Black Sky Tiger Belt

Defense: 65; Durability: 800/800

Skills: Magic Resistance Up (Medium); Abnormal Status Resistance Up (Medium); Item Bag (Small)

Even the set bonus got a boost. The old Black Cat set could only be equipped by Black Cats, it gave you +10 to all stats, as well as Death Immunity if you wore the whole thing. The Black Sky Tiger gave you +20 to all stats, Death Immunity, and Stealth Enhancement. And it could only be worn by Black Sky Tigers, which made Fran its only eligible user.

Still, I don't think Kiara would have worn it in the first place. It was far too cute. Aristeia had taken the charm of the Black Cat set and added a more feminine twist. The main armor was now a proper shirt with a collar, and it covered Fran's midriff, which was good news. The less she was exposed, the better! Aristeia had also redesigned the right glove to be a gauntlet, which functioned as a decent shield. The bottom part was a frilly skirt over underwear that looked like a cross between culottes and bloomers. The knee-high socks made Fran look more mature, and they connected to boots that looked like pumps. And none of it detracted from her agility.

Despite Aristeia's masculine mannerisms, she was still a woman. Her design was a lot girlier than Garrus's.

"It's frilly, but I can still move in it."

You look very cute, Fran.

"It's among my finest work, to be sure," said Aristeia. "And you look great in it. I think you'll be drawing the attention of the men around you soon enough."



Fran frowned. "That doesn't sound good."

"Why not?"

"Monsters can find me too."

Fran, that's not what Aristeia meant...

She had no interest in looking cute. The only thing that mattered to her was whether it would help or hinder her in combat.

Aristeia groaned. "Teacher..."

I know. But what do you want me to do? She doesn't care about that stuff!

"I know," said Aristeia, staring at me. "But it's such a waste."

She might not care about dolling herself up, but she still wanted others to look their best.

I agree. Look, I'll try, all right?

"And I'll...temper my expectations."

Thank you.

"?"

Aristeia chuckled. "I can't wait to see you again, Fran."

"Hm."

Finally, they shook hands.

"Thanks for everything," said Fran.

"Take care. Teacher isn't used to using his skills yet."

"Hm. We'll keep training."

We'll try not to go too crazy.

We should probably focus on ranged combat until the skill situation stabilized. Also, if an encounter got too dangerous, I could always teleport us out.

So, do we come back here for my next maintenance? I asked.

"I won't be here then," said Aristeia. "I travel around the world. In fact, I'll be moving before the end of the month."

Then how were we supposed to contact her?

"You're going back to the continent of Jillbird, right?" she said.

“That’s my next stop.”

“Hm.”

We’re going to the auction in Granzell’s capital.

“Aaah, I see. That’s in two weeks’ time, isn’t it?”

Yeah, thereabouts.

“I might cross over the border before you,” said Aristeia. “I have some business in the southwest of Belioth, in a little town called Ulster. And I can sense your mana now, so I’ll contact you once you’re in the area.”

That made things easier. Especially since Aristeia could sense a weapon’s mana signature from quite a distance.

See you on the other side.

“Hm.”

“Safe travels.”

“Bye-bye.”

That morning, our first stop was Green Goat. We wanted to know about the war effort and check in on the Black Cats. We rushed through the forest on Jet’s back, heading toward the city in a straight line—ignoring small monsters and navigating the mountains with Air Hop.

“I see it.”

“Woof!”

By midday, Green Goat was in sight.

“The walls are damaged.”

Looks like they had quite a fight.

Some stragglers must have attacked Green Goat. Kiara and Mea had tried to thin out the horde, but they couldn’t kill them all. The walls and the area around the town bore testament to the fierce battle that had resulted. The walls were scorched, and parts of the forest were burned down. The trees by the gates had been uprooted by some powerful magic. Fortunately, the monsters never made it inside, and there were still guards patrolling the walls. Somehow, they’d stopped the assault. The guards were probably still nervous, so we landed out of sight to save them from attacking Jet.

“Come on.”

“Woof!”

Jet shrunk down to the size of a large dog, and we headed toward the gates. The long line of people we’d seen when we first entered the city was gone, and the gates were closed. I guess they weren’t so foolish as to open up right after the horde had attacked.

As we approached, one of the guards spotted us.

“Stop right there!”

“State your name!”

They were definitely nervous. I was worried one of them might start firing at us.

They don’t want to kill you...I don’t think.

“Hm.”

Despite my overworked skills, I couldn’t sense any murderous intent. They were just terrified and trying to do their jobs.

“I’m Fran. Adventurer.”

The guards kept glaring. From the way they spoke, you wouldn’t guess they were talking to a child.

“What’s with the wolf?!”

“He’s my familiar.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing out here, missy—”

“Wait, hang on!”

Another guardsman stepped in.

“What!”

“Sh-she can come in!”

He recognized Fran, and we were soon let into the city. The main street was full of people.

There are a lot more than I was expecting.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

They were spread out on both sides of the street, but despite their numbers, they were all huddled together quietly. These must be the

refugees from nearby villages. They'd escaped to Green Goat with nothing but the clothes on their back. They'd survived the night, but they were far too exhausted to smile. They only stared at Jet, too tired to be afraid.

We headed toward the viscount's abode, until we noticed a group of refugees who looked different from the rest. They'd put up tents and even set up a simple kitchen, but the biggest difference was the smiles on their faces. They were the first smiles we'd seen since we'd entered the city, and they were on the very faces Fran was looking for.

Guess we won't have to ask the viscount after all.

"Hm!"

It was the Schwarz Katze encampment. The Black Cats were more than ready to evacuate—they really weren't kidding when they said they were used to running. Their quality of life here was far higher than the other beastmen. It felt more like a campsite than a refugee camp. The older folk looked relaxed, and some of them were even playing board games. By contrast, the younger Black Cats looked tired. I guess they weren't as used to running away. Still, all their years of nomadism weren't for nothing. Schwarz Katze had been in a safe spot, but escape was in their blood. If I had a hat, I would have taken it off to them.

Fran approached someone she recognized.

"Elder!" he cried out. "Salutia!"

"Princess, you're all right!"

"Oh, thank the gods!"

Salutia and the elder stopped maintaining their equipment and ran over to Fran, smiling. The rest of the Black Cats soon followed suit.

"Guys, the princess is back!"

"Welcome back, princess!"

As soon as they saw her, their exhaustion turned to joy. Fran was happy to see them too, although she didn't quite know how to handle this welcome.

"I'm back."

She pursed her lips and nodded. Her kin seemed to agree that she was devastatingly cute. Their smiles turned to laughter as they swarmed around her. She was kind of like their idol.

“Come on, you lot,” said the elder. “Stop pushing! Let the princess breathe!”

“But we wanna talk to her!”

“Yeah!”

“Quiet!” he said. “The princess must be exhausted. You need to give her some space.”

“Fine.”

“Aw, man.”

At his command, the Black Cats dispersed, and the elder led us to the center of their campsite. No one complained when Salutia tagged along. At some point, she’d become the representative for the youngsters.

“Right this way,” said the elder. “I’m afraid this is the best seat we have.”

“Hm. Thanks.”

“Can we get some tea here?” he shouted.

Fran sat on a chair while the elder sat down cross-legged in front of her. Salutia was right behind him, and the rest of the Black Cats were all around us.

“So, what happened out there?” the elder asked. “What remains of our village?”

We knew they’d want to know what’d happened to their town, so we’d stopped by Schwarz Katze on our way here.

“It’s fine,” said Fran. “Most of the houses are still intact. We defeated the monsters. You can go back whenever you want.”

“R-really?”

“Hm.”

“That’s great news!”

“Yes!”

“You’re the best, princess!”

“Three cheers for the princess!”

The Black Cats exploded with cheers. The ground felt like it was shaking. They must really have been worried about their home.

“Thank you so much! D-did you destroy all the Fiends by yourself?”

“No,” said Fran. “Mea and Kiara were with me.”

“Kiara? You mean *the* Kiara?”

“You knew her?” she asked.

“Of course! Lady Kiara is as much of a hero as you are!”

“Yes! She and Jet saved us!”

“Really?” Fran asked.

“Woof!”

Before they came to aid us, Kiara and Jet had joined up to help Salutia and the others.

The Black Cats had split into two evacuation groups. The first was made up of youngsters who were fast on their feet. They were sent to reach Green Goat as fast as they could and bring help. The village’s supplies were put on horseback to go with them. I suspect the elder had sent them ahead because he knew they would survive, and the blood of the Black Cats would survive with them. Although he would probably never admit it.

The second group was made up of children and the elderly, protected by the village guards. They were more vulnerable and moved slowly. This was the group that Kiara and Jet had saved from the Fiends.

“Kiara would be happy to see you all safe,” said Fran.

“Where is she now?”

“Hm...she’s...”

Fran trailed off. The sorrow on her face was more than enough to tell them what had happened.

Everything fell silent in the makeshift square. Finally, Fran told them about Kiara’s final moments.

Everyone listened intently. The village elder had been saved by Kiara when he was younger, and he was the first to break into tears. The rest of the Black Cats soon followed. But Fran ended the story with a smile.

“Crying wouldn’t make Kiara happy. I think she’d like it more if

you celebrated and called her a hero.”

“Princess...!” said the elder. “Oh, but you’re right!”

“Yes...we will do that!”

“The princess is right!”

Fran’s influence was immediate. The clincher was probably when she wiped her own tears away and smiled at them. They couldn’t celebrate yet, but the gloom had lifted.

Meanwhile, we were attracting a lot of attention from the other beastmen. Seeing an entire village of Black Cats crying in unison must be quite unsettling. Even some of the children had started crying too. I was really sorry about that.

After Fran finished explaining, the Green Goat came to investigate.

“We received reports of loud sobbing...”

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“Who’s in charge here?”

The other refugees must have reported us. I couldn’t blame them. You never knew what was happening with this crowd.

When the village elder explained, the guardsmen turned to Fran. Their eyes were full of more admiration than resentment.

“You’re the Black Lightning Princess?!”

“We heard the stories!”

Apparently, when Mea came to see Marmano, she’d told the entire city about Fran.

The knights asked right away if they could have the honor of escorting us to the viscount. Fran went along with it, but the sight of the other beastmen freezing, kneeling, and praying made her feel a bit awkward. I guess she was the only Evolved Black Cat in town. Going incognito was difficult.

Mea had told them all about the powerful Black Lightning Princess and how she led the charge against the Fiends and monsters, risking life and limb for the Beastman Nation.

We entered the viscount’s estate and went to the waiting room until Marmano arrived. The city was still in a state of emergency, and

the viscount looked like its true protector in his heavy armor. It was a far cry from the last time we dropped in on him to find him in his nightgown.

“Welcome, Black Lightning Princess!”

“Hm.”

“The Princess Nemea told me everything! On behalf of Green Goat, I thank you for saving our city.”

“I was protecting my friends.”

“And you saved us in the process. I hear you took on hordes of Fiends and monsters by yourself. And that you destroyed them all!”

I mean, we *had* done that, but the way Marmano told the story, Mea had *definitely* added some embellishments. The viscount’s eyes glowed as he recounted Fran’s great defense of the Beastman Nation. Apparently, Mea’s version of Fran had defeated a thousand monsters with a single strike and rained spells down from on high, defeating many platoons. He made it sound like she had her own Godsword.

“Though you shook with fear when faced with such terrifying creatures,” said Marmano, “your desire to protect your kin proved stronger! I wish I could’ve seen it!”

Mea’s exaggerations had clouded the story so much that I had no idea who he was talking about anymore.

“I thank you again,” said Marmano, bowing his head deeply. “You didn’t only save Green Goat; you saved the entire country.”

“It was nothing special.”

“Now, now. If you say that, it would be difficult for me to reward my men. You accomplished something great. I will not ask you to blow your own horn, but you must recognize what you have done. If you don’t, you may end up making some unnecessary enemies.”

He was deadly serious, and I saw his point. If Fran rejected all the praise that was piled on her, then the common soldier couldn’t accept his reward with a clear conscience. The nobility especially would take issue with her. Downplaying her achievements to a garden-variety noble would make him feel small. Marmano was an exception to this rule.

People judged others by how they behaved themselves. If a young adventurer was happy to be praised, the nobility wouldn’t give it a

second thought. However, if she held herself to an unworldly standard, that would bother them.

“Hm,” said Fran. “Got it.”

“Excellent. Ah! But I apologize for lecturing you!”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I know you’re looking out for me.”

“I see the Black Lightning Princess has humility to match her strength! You keep outdoing yourself!”

“Now you’re laying it on thick.”

Marmano laughed. “Our country would have suffered grave losses in that pincer attack if you had not intercepted the northern forces and destroyed the dungeon they were coming from. You, Princess Nemea, and Lady Kiara have saved us. The only ones who can say the same are the two generals who fought on the southern front.”

I was quite interested to hear about the southern front, and the two generals who led the charge. Judging by Marmano’s triumphant tone, I guess they won.

“How did the battle go there?” Fran asked.

“It was a raging victory for the Beastman Nation!”

“It’s over?”

The war only started just under a week ago. Both countries had set their armies against each other. Resolving that should have taken months, if not years.

“The difference between our forces was too great,” said Marmano.

“But I thought Basharl had powerful mages?”

“That they do. Their mages and manatech far outclass ours.”

The mage guild in Basharl had invented the manaphone, so I could see them developing manatech for military purposes. Even if the beastman forces outnumbered Basharl, how did they manage such a victory?

According to Marmano, Basharl’s soldiers were so weak that they couldn’t capitalize on their magical advantage.

“It is more a problem of awareness than race,” he explained.

“Awareness?” Fran asked.

“Yes.”

There was no question that beastmen were physically stronger than humans. But mentally, there was a huge difference between them too.

“Our army is large,” said Marmano. “But we also call upon our peasants in times of war.”

The kingdoms of this world conscripted their citizens to fight. In peacetime, professional soldiers kept the peace and exterminated monsters. When they were sent to the front lines, the number of reserve troops dropped too.

“From the moment they are conscripted,” said Marmano, “our soldiers are different.”

“How so?”

“Basharl forcibly conscripts everyone they can. Naturally, many of them are reluctant to go.”

It made sense. No one wanted to risk dying on a battlefield.

“It’s different in the Beastman Nation,” he explained. “In times of war, our civilian militia swarm to volunteer. Some even treat it like a hunting trip. By the time we’re done recruiting, there’s so many that we don’t know what to do with them.”

So, Fran was simply following the customs of her race by being a battle junkie.

“Most of the forces on both sides are made up of peasant troops,” said Marmano. “But Basharl’s don’t really want to be there. Meanwhile, most of our peasants are basically soldiers themselves. They feel right at home on the frontlines.”

That difference was huge. Plus, the Beastman Nation regularly trained their people. That made the average citizen strong enough to go toe-to-toe with a professional soldier. Except the Black Cats, of course...

“So,” said Marmano, “Basharl has superior manatech, but a war is fought by soldiers. And that is where the real difference lies. Granted, there are always things going on behind the scenes...”

There were no guarantees in war, and there was always some dark plot or another going on in the background.

“But we will not lose when it comes to raw military force. Why,

the Basharlians retreated as soon as they received word that their northern invasion had failed!”

After that, the Beastman Nation claimed victory with ease. Their great Land Mage, who was the current chief of the White Rhino tribe, was also there for the battle. He and a band of mercenaries held the line, and even inflicted some punishment on the retreating Basharlians forces, until backup arrived. The Beastman Nation’s commanders could fight as well as they led.

Fran finished her tea. “Do you know where Mea and the others are?”

That was the next thing on her mind.

Marmano shook his head. “She went south after stopping here. I do not know where she is now.”

“Do you think she’s all right?”

“I dare not presume, but her strength is reassuring...”

“I see.”

“If you wish to find out more, you should go to the capital.”

I guess that made Bestia our next stop, although something that Murelia had said was still bothering me. She wanted us to save that Romeo kid...

Fran had reservations about leaving immediately too.

“Will this town be all right?” she asked.

The Black Cats were sheltering here, and she had to think about their safety.

“You have nothing to worry about,” said Marmano. “Our knights, soldiers, and adventurers will soon return from the war, and we have enough food to last until then.”

Food was the only threat facing them now. Since we’d destroyed the dungeon, everything was back to normal.

“There’s still the odd monster or two lurking about, but goblins will not break through our walls. And I shall see to it that no harm befalls the Black Cats.”

Marmano stuck up his lip and thumped his chest. He knew she was worried about her kin and did everything he could to dispel her

concerns.

“Thanks...” said Fran.

“You are most welcome.”

The viscount asked whether we wanted to stay the night, but we were in a hurry. Now we knew that the Black Cats were safe, Fran wanted to make sure that Mea was all right.

We left Green Goat just as the sun set. The guards were worried about us, but Jet could deal with anything we encountered. Weak monsters couldn't catch him, and anything that did would be easily defeated with some shadow spells. Anything stronger, Jet could detect and avoid.

So long as Jet and I were around, Fran could even sleep on the way.

“Zzz.”

And that was exactly what she did. She had mastered the skill of sleeping while Jet ran at full speed. She held onto the reins and his fur, breathing quietly. I could probably even stop supporting her with Telekinesis, although I wasn't about to do that. Fran even ate a solid meal before falling asleep, and not just kebabs and bread. She ate soup and pasta with a fork and spoon, like she was seated at a table.

She could probably spend her whole life on Jet's back. She already got the hang of eating and sleeping here, although bathing would probably be tricky. Maybe a shower? But then Jet would get drenched. Perhaps a wind barrier would solve that issue...

Jet broke my speculations with a groan.

“Woof.”

What's the matter, boy?

“A-arf.”

Fran's grip was so tight that she was choking him out. Even though he was back at his original size, she'd somehow found his weak spot.

You're doing great, I told him.

“R-ruff?”

I mean, you don't wanna wake Fran up, do you?

“W-woof!”

I *definitely* wasn't getting back at him for falling asleep while Fran was worried sick during my remodeling.

“Hmgh...”

“Arf!”

You're doing fine, boy!

We rushed through the night, serenaded by Jet's whining.

The moon looks nice tonight.

“Hurf...!”

We made it to the capital the next morning.

It's so peaceful here.

“Hm.”

Bestia was exactly as we left it. The war hadn't reached here, and merchants and adventurers were still lining up to enter.

Land somewhere close.

“Woof!”

“Teacher, look.”

Huh?

Fran was awake, and she pointed at something flying over the horizon.

What is that...? A wyvern?

“No. It's Mea.”

Oh, that's Lind!

I only realized when I pointed all my Detection Skills at them.

I'm surprised you could make him out from here.

“I can always spot my friends,” said Fran.

I-I see. Abort landing and take us to Mea, Jet.

“Woof!”

Mea and her party must have spotted us too. They broke off their route to the capital and approached us at full speed. Mea and Quina were riding on Lind's back. Mianoa was the only one missing.

“Fran!” Mea called out. “Teacher, Jet! It’s been a while!”

“Hm!”

Mea waved from on top of her dragon, and Jet and Lind found a place to land. As soon they’d set down, Mea and Fran jumped off and rushed toward each other.

“Mea!”

“Fran!”

“Good to see you’re okay.”

“Likewise!”

They held each other’s hands and hopped around like high schoolers. It was about the most age-appropriate thing I’d ever seen them do.

“Perhaps you would like to be seated?” asked Quina. “I am sure you have much to discuss with each other.”

“Yes!”

While we weren’t looking, the royal maid had stealthily prepared a brunch table. Her nickname wasn’t Reaper for nothing. Mea was used to her maid’s antics, so she nodded and took a seat. Fran followed her lead.

“Some snacks, paired with the fresh tea from the capital.”

Only the snacks were actually steak.

“Bison steak!” said Mea. “My favorite!”

“Looks good.”

This was more like lunch than afternoon tea. They had thick-cut steak in one hand and tea in the other. Other cultures might think that Quina was being silly, but this was the custom here.

Fran filled up on several cuts of steak, then started the conversation.

“What have you been up to?”

“Well, you see...”

They could’ve had this conversation in the capital, but neither of them could wait. When Mea was finished, Fran told her about how I went through remodeling, and that I was having difficulty using my

skills.

“So, you can’t fight as well because you can’t control them?” Mea asked. “That sounds horrible!”

“Hm. It’s really bad.”

“If it’s any reassurance,” said Quina, “it isn’t unheard of.”

Really?

“Yes.”

She explained that these things sometimes happened when Detection and Physical Enhancement Skills reached their maximum level and evolved into their advanced forms. It could also happen when your level spiked after defeating a powerful enemy. That was more what’d happened to me. Either way, it completely threw off your feel.

“Although I’m afraid that I’ve never experienced it myself,” said Quina, “so I have no advice to give you.”

I see... What do people usually do? I asked.

“Train.”

Urslars’ idea would work faster, but training was the next best thing. Next, we told Mea about how I was somehow made from the Godsword Cherubim. She was quite surprised.

“To think I’d run into one Godsword user after another...”

“Yes,” Quina agreed. “How unusual.”

Come on, you have a real Godsword in your hands. At best, I’m just a pseudo-Godsword.

“A pseudo-Godsword who *also* happens to be an Intelligent Weapon. And I wouldn’t be surprised if you have even *more* secrets tucked away.”

“Truly. You might as well be a Godsword at this point.”

I laughed wryly. What else could I do? I’d seen enough of Land Sword Gaia to know I wasn’t even in the same ballpark. Lind couldn’t express its full power yet, so Mea had no idea. Still, if Gaia was any indication, that dragon would be a truly terrifying beast...

I couldn’t compete with that.

But Mea overheard my grumbling and glared at me.

“Listen, Godsword or not, you saved our country! Act like it!”

“Hm!” Fran agreed. “You’re a great sword!”

D-do you really think so?

“Of course!” said Mea. “You judge an adventurer by their equipment as much as their skill. Think about that! By devaluing your achievements, you’re devaluing Fran’s too! You should hold your head up high...although I’ll let you figure out the logistics of that!”

I’m actually putting Fran down...?

“That’s right! What if I told you about an adventurer and her sword, who were powerful enough to save the Beastman Nation from monsters and Fiends, and who even destroyed the dungeon that created them?”

I’d be impressed. It sounded very heroic.

I see... I guess I’m... We really are great.

“You’re fantastic!” Mea agreed. “Both of you!”

I needed to be humble without being a doormat. What Marmano told Fran applied to me as well. I’d just lost confidence after seeing Gaia’s unleashed form. The difference in power was so great that everything I had done seemed like nothing. That frustration kept piling up inside of me. Every time I remembered the Godsword’s powers, I couldn’t help but put myself down.

I had to acknowledge that gulf, but I also had to remember my promise to become as powerful as Gaia. Mea was right. Calling myself a piece of junk was as good as saying that Fran fought with a piece of junk.

You’re right. Sorry about that.

“Very good.”

I should strive to be like Fran: confident but not arrogant.

“So,” said Mea, “did you get Urslars to unleash Gaia for you?”

“Hm. Just for a little bit.”

Mea was jealous of our sparring match with the S-Rank adventurer. These combat addicts were all the same.

“I wanted to fight him too!” Mea said, biting the tablecloth.

Quina whipped around to look at her, and Mea regained her

composure.

“In any case,” she said, clearing her throat and changing the subject, “I see you’re wearing new armor. It looks great. Did Aristea modify your old one? How are its stats?”

She squinted at Fran’s new equipment. Unlike Fran, she was still conscious of appearances. I really wanted to know how Quina had raised her to be interested in feminine things.

“Hm,” said Fran. “It’s perfect.”

“I see,” Mea chuckled.

Was Fran’s cuteness getting to her?

Fran tilted her head. “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Mea said, trying to hide a faint blush.

“Princess, are you pleased that your armor was crafted by the same Godsmith?”

“N-no...! I definitely wasn’t thinking that!”

“But it clearly shows on your face.”

“Shut up!”

Mea frantically tried to silence her maidservant, but the truth was out. Seeing her like this, I understood why Quina enjoyed teasing her.

“A-anyway,” said Mea, changing the subject again, “you asked about what we were doing?”

“Hm.”

Fran went along with it. She didn’t seem to understand why her friend was so bothered in the first place.

“Did you go to the southern front?” Fran asked.

“Correct. Do you know what happened there?”

“A little. Your powerful Land Mage sent Basharl packing. Were you there with them?”

“Yes. Although in my capacity as a mercenary, not a princess.”

“Why?”

High command knew about Mea’s identity, but she wanted to keep it a secret from the lower ranks. She fought as a bodyguard for Ligdartha, the White Rhino commander.

“They wouldn’t be able to fight effectively if they knew the princess was there. Also...”

Also?

For once, Mea was tongue-tied. Maybe it had something to do with why she hid her identity in the first place? I considered changing the subject, but I didn’t get the chance.

“It’s because Selene was there,” said Quina.

“Who’s Selene?” Fran asked.

“A royal maid,” she explained. “And a Gray Tapir, like myself. While she’s not as well versed in combat as I am, she is a master of illusion. And she looks similar to the princess. With a little help from manatech, she serves as the princess’ body double.”

I guess she was the one we met when we first arrived in Bestia.

You don’t like her? I asked. *What’s the problem?*

“It’s nothing like that,” said Mea. “It’s just that...if I made myself known, I’d have to trade places with Selene...”

“And you would stick out like a sore thumb,” said Quina.

“In an instant,” Mea agreed.

“What?” Fran asked.

“It’s the way she plays her role,” said Mea. “You see...”

“Selene behaves like a prim and proper princess,” said Quina. “And Lady Mea could not keep that act up for a second. The difference between them would be immediately obvious.”

Every kingdom employed body doubles, but if Mea and Selene traded places, the nobles and commanders of the Beastman Nation would find out that the princess they had been protecting was a fake.

“They would start comparing her to Selene.”

How could they not?

“And it wouldn’t take long for them to start complaining. ‘Man, the body double was much cuter.’ ‘Yeah, she’s so proper and elegant.’ ‘I don’t much like this beast of a princess we have now.’”

Quina mimicked the voices of various other beastmen, but she wasn’t very good at it. Wasn’t she a master of illusion? Perhaps she just didn’t feel like it. Either way, her deadpan voice drove the point home.

Yeah, that'd be rough...

“Urgh...”

Mea groaned with frustration. She was hot-blooded, and that suited the beastmen's natural temperament. She'd probably be quite popular. Still, men would be men, and they still admired the kind of prim and proper act that Selene put on.

Which raised another question.

Why have that kind of body double to begin with?

Selene could just as easily have played an energetic princess. Why was she ordered to play such a specific role? Why let the public see a gentle and helpless princess when Mea was a ferocious fighter? Surely, that would cause a public outcry when the real Mea was finally revealed.

You're going to give your citizens a heart attack...

Mea nodded. “You're right. It doesn't make sense, does it? I really should've gotten a body double who behaved more like me.”

“His Highness thought it would be funny,” said Quina.

He what?

“He wants to see how the people react to Lady Mea after watching Selene's act for so long.”

“The old man has a terrible sense of humor...”

I felt sorry for everyone in the Beastman Nation who'd been dragged into Rigdith's antics.

“He also wishes to tease Lady Mea,” said Quina.

“Tease her?” Fran asked.

“Yes. He enjoys seeing Lady Mea blush when someone who looks just like her acts all prim and proper.”

“He really has the worst sense of humor in all the realm!” said Mea.

“Also,” Quina went on, “because her body double behaves so differently, the princess is less likely to be discovered.”

Now *that* made sense. Selene was no ordinary body double. Because of the act she put on, no one would suspect that a rowdy adventurer like Mea was the real princess. However, I suspected that

was more of an afterthought in Rigdith's mind.

All right, so how did the battle go? I asked.

"Honestly...we didn't do much fighting," said Mea.

"The enemy was already on the ropes by the time we got there," Quina agreed.

They'd wanted to chase the scattering troops deeper into enemy territory, but they weren't allowed.

"We were only permitted to join the war effort if we stayed with the general," Mea said.

He'd even assigned her as his personal bodyguard so that she couldn't try anything. Smart man.

"Still, we parted ways with them around halfway."

"Why?" Fran asked.

"I...wanted to look into House Magnolia," Mea said.

I thought she was joking, but it turned out she was just as bothered by Murelia's last words as we were. Murelia had asked us to save Romeo, and so Mea went looking for information about him and his house.

You went into enemy territory?

"It just so happens that I didn't have to. Our forces have entered Magnolia territory."

Don't they have forts along their border?

"They do. But our forces destroyed them. They are in disarray."

The Basharliian forces had gone from assured victory to utter defeat. Their ranks were in chaos. They couldn't house all their foot soldiers in their garrisons, and there was the possibility that spies had infiltrated their ranks. The advancing beastman forces only put more pressure on them.

So, you just went straight through them?

"You could say that. Lucius handled any garrisons that put up a fight."

"Lucius?" Fran asked.

"Lucius Laurentia, our court mage. Heir to the Tragedy of

Laurentia and the greatest Land Mage in the kingdom. In Chrome, he's known as Great Wall Lucius."

Did she just say Laurentia?

Does he have something to do with Linford?

"Linford...the Fiendmancer who summoned Murelia?" Mea asked.

"Hm," said Fran. "Linford Laurentia."

Linford was a Fiendmancer. Before Fran and her friends defeated him, he turned into an Archfiend and wrought havoc on Bulbola. You could even say he was responsible for the invading forces that we fought.

"So, he was a Laurentia..."

Yeah. That monster was over a hundred years old.

"A hundred?" Mea asked. "Then I don't think Lucius is his son. He's only forty."

Maybe a grandson.

This Lucius person...he's not a Fiendmancer, is he?

"Of course not."

"If anything," said Quina, "I hear Sir Lucius has the utmost hatred for Fiendmancers."

If that were true, then he might have been a victim of Linford's antics. Fiendmancers didn't necessarily beget Fiendmancers, and we didn't know how far Lucius was removed from the original Laurentias. Also, I couldn't imagine that Rigdith would risk having a Fiendmancer in his army.

"Lucius' Land Magic is peerless in siege warfare. A fort is no more than a hut to him."

"He attacks the forts with Land Magic?" Fran asked.

"That is an option, but mostly he digs tunnels. Basharl guards its underground channels with manatech, but with all the chaos that was going on, they didn't notice Lucius digging around."

There was a similar account in Japan of the warlord Takeda digging tunnels to send fighters under enemy lines. Fiction may have embellished history, but tunneling was still an effective way to breach a fortress.

“Because of him, we made it to House Magnolia easily.”

“All their soldiers had been sent to the front lines,” Quina confirmed. “The castle was effectively deserted.”

“Did you find Romeo?” Fran asked.

Mea shook her head gloomily. “No. I didn’t.”

Did they meet some kind of resistance? Was Romeo even real? Maybe he was evacuated when the war started.

“Someone got to him first,” Mea said.

Who?

“A two-meter ogre of a man with battle scars all over his body. Sound familiar?”

We knew two men who fitted the description, but Urslars lacked the scars. And besides, he’d been with us the whole time. That only left one person.

“Theraclede?” Fran asked.

“That’s what I think,” said Mea. “He must have attacked House Magnolia and abducted Romeo. By the time we got there, the Magnolian guards were a pile of corpses.”

But what would he want with Romeo? Theraclede had betrayed Murelia in her final moments. Did he abduct the boy out of spite? Or was there another reason?

Any idea why he did it? I asked.

“Not a clue.”

Figures.

“Could Jet track him down?” Mea asked.

Jet whined. As good a sniffer as he was, their scent would be long gone by now, and Theraclede probably teleported away from the scene of the crime anyway.

“I see...” said Mea. “Unfortunately, we have no other leads.”

“We’ll put up a bounty. There’s already one on him, but putting up another will keep him on his toes.”

“Hm...”

That was probably the best we could do.

It can't be helped. If we see Theraclede again, we'll just have to ask him. Not that he'll tell us right away.

"Hm!"

I didn't want to see that monster again, but we'd already run into him twice. A third encounter seemed inevitable.

"We'll beat the details out of him."

After what happened with Kiara, negotiation was off the table. Besides, combat was probably the only way to get any answers out of him.

We'll have to get stronger then.

"Hm."

Fran nodded, filled with determination.

Chapter 4:

Mea and Fran

“**T**EACHER, would you please give me Master Kiara’s body?”

Of course.

After our little meeting in the clearing, we proceeded to the capital. I was preparing myself to wait in line, but Mea had a special entrance to skip the crowds. Such was royal privilege, I guess.

Mianoa, Kiara’s attendant, had returned to Bestia ahead of us—bringing word of Kiara’s death and preparing for the funeral. I took Kiara’s body out of Pocket Dimension and laid it inside the coffin they’d prepared. Signs of Kiara’s final battle were still on her. Her clothes were in tatters, although the blood had been cleaned from her face.

“Kiara...”

“Master...”

Fran and Mea teared up, while Quina and Mianoa remained expressionless. The dignity of their office prohibited them from showing sorrow.

I asked about their plans for the funeral and found that it was nothing like I’d expected. I was used to Buddhist and Western services, but the people of this world had different ideas about death and religion. On top of that, the beastmen had different customs to the other humanoid races of this world.

Since the soul left the body and ascended to heaven at the moment of death, it was held in the highest regard. Unlike on Earth, the soul could be observed in this world, and praying that they’d enjoy a good afterlife was crucial. In a way, the actual funeral was held at the moment of death—although they took good care of the body afterward too.

Still, the corpse was honored for practical purposes as much as dignity. Bodies often turned into the undead here, and the stronger an adventurer was in life, the stronger they would be in undeath. If those left behind couldn’t take a body with them, they usually cremated it on the spot. To reduce the chance of undead as much as possible, they

didn't even keep the bones.

When a corpse was brought home, a funeral and anti-undead rituals were performed before the burial, but all of this was done for the people who were left behind. The funeral gave them closure, much like the funerals on Earth. Seeing the dead lowered into the ground helped people cope with the reality of the loss. But the people here didn't give any bouquets or offerings to the dead. There were prayers, but they were performed by the deceased's family and friends, rather than monks. Indeed, because the dead went immediately to their gods, religion had no part in a funeral. That was the major difference between funerals here and the ones on Earth.

"We will hold Kiara's funeral in four days," said Mianoa. "The day after the Beast King returns."

"You contacted Father?" Mea asked.

"Yes. We used the eagle messengers at the Adventurer's Guild. Manaphones can't cross continents, and besides, they have likely been tapped by Basharl."

Rigdith must be hurrying if he was going to be back here in three days. I guess the war only made things more urgent. Basharl specifically attacked when he was away, although it wouldn't have given the beastmen much trouble if it weren't for the northern ambush.

"What are your plans after this, Lady Fran?" Mianoa asked. "If you need to, we can arrange for you to return to Granzell posthaste on His Highness's vessel. It will return to Bulbola as soon as it drops His Highness off at Grayseal."

Fran nodded. "Hm. That'll help."

"Very well. Please confirm the dates here."

I was a bit startled by how quickly she agreed.

Uhh, are you sure you don't want to attend Kiara's funeral?

"Hm? Yeah."

That's when I realized that she didn't need to. After all, Fran was already with Kiara when she died. Quina and Mea didn't seem offended either, so I guess she wasn't being rude. If anything, Mea seemed sad to hear that Fran was leaving so soon.

"Can't you stay a while longer?"

“Sorry, I have a promise to keep.”

We have to attend the auction in Granzell.

“I see... Then I suppose you should make haste...”

“My lady, when you look sad like that, you make it difficult for Fran to leave.”

“R-right.”

“Besides,” said Quina, “you still have a few days.”

“Y-you’re right! We can hang out until then!” Mea said, her spirits returning.

Quina was an expert in handling her master’s mood swings.

“Hm. We can hang out.”

Fran was all for it too. Mea was her closest friend. I hoped they would make some good memories together.

“So! I can’t imagine you’ve decided where to stay?” Mea asked.

“Hm.”

“Then you shall stay at the palace! We’ll have a room prepared for you! There are many chambers there!”

“My lady,” Quina teased, “you must be more direct if you wish to spend the evenings with Lady Fran.”

“Wh...no! It’s just...we have a lot of rooms...!”

We’d love to. It’s a big help.

“V-very good!” said Mea. “If you insist!”

“Thank you, Teacher.”

Fran likes being around Mea. Don’t you, Fran?

“Hm.”

“Mwa ha ha! Quina, prepare the best room for them!”

“Immediately.”

No, just get us a regular room!

“How about the vacant room next to my lady’s quarters?” Quina suggested.

“That will do nicely!” said Mea.

“Hm.”

I guess neither of them would be getting much sleep over the next few days.

Our first day in Bestia went by in a flash. Fran and Mea toured the city as frantically as they fought their battles. They ate, went sightseeing, and then settled down to spar with each other. The training grounds was the first place they visited in the castle, and the place where they spent most of their time too.

Fran’s match with Mea wasn’t on the same level as the fight with Urslars, but it was still quite intense. By the time we were done, the castle training grounds were in shambles. There were holes in the ground, slashes on the walls, and bits of molten rock everywhere. I wanted to fix up the place with some Land spells, but the facilities were equipped with magic dampeners, so they weren’t very effective.

Mea laughed. “My heart races every time I fight you, Fran!”

“Hm!”

Our immediate goal had been to adjust to our new skill levels, but Fran and Mea couldn’t resist turning up the heat. They’d really gone at each other, and they might even have destroyed parts of the castle if Quina hadn’t stopped them. Still, they were both satisfied, plus our Physical Maneuver Skills had gone up by a lot and, thanks to Mea’s fire, we’d even gained Flame Resistance.

But the highlight of the day was visiting the temple. Mea pointed it out as we were sightseeing and reminded us that we could get more skills by changing Class there.

The last time Fran did that was before the fighting tournament, and we’d just stuck with Bladamage because it was convenient. Focus Mana was an excellent Class Skill for Fran because it made up for her relative lack of magical ability. Bladamage also allowed her to wield both magic and physical attacks in battle.

But it was time for a change, so we made our offerings and entered the Class Change Chamber. A crystal slate in the center of the room allowed you to see your available Classes when you touched it. The room was private and perfectly sealed, and the only other person allowed in was the janitor. Spying on someone inside was technically

possible with spells and manatech, but no one wanted to risk divine retribution.

You have a lot of options.

“Hm.”

Almost fifty classes were displayed on the slate—everything from the starter classes and up.

You can get a description of them for an additional three thousand gold. Let's go for it.

Once the dust had cleared, five classes stood out. Our last battle had finally unlocked one we'd been wanting for a while: Sword King. As the name implied, it made you a sword specialist, giving bonuses to Strength, Sword Mastery, and Sword Arts. Its Class Skill was Sword King Form.

Sword King was probably on the same level as the Beast King's Dragoon Class, which meant it was even viable for S-Class adventurers. It was clearly our best option, but there were some other interesting possibilities.

Like Paladin, an anti-Fiend Class that bestowed a variety of auras. Its Class Skill was Holy Armor. I couldn't see the skill description, and it wasn't available to us, so I assumed it gave amazing protection against Fiends. Either way, it would definitely come in handy if we ever fought Theraclede again. Or some other powerful Fiend, for that matter.

Elite Wizard looks interesting too. It's a fully magical Class that reduces the stress of simultaneous casting.

It lacked a Class Skill, but Fran could use it to simulcast.

“This Shadowblade is cool too.”

Uh-huh. Stealth, detection, and a powerful boost to Agility. You could probably teleport anywhere you wanted with that Dimension Sense Class Skill.

With how nerfed my Detection and Stealth Skills were right now, high speed would be a great fit for Fran.

And finally, we have Tenma Warrior.

“Hm.”

This was an all-rounder. It boosted all your stats, spells, combat masteries and arts. It also increased the effectiveness of your

Intimidation Skills. A good choice for a fighter who used both physical and magic attacks. Although it didn't have a Class Skill.

So, Sword King, Paladin, Elite Wizard, Shadowblade, Tenma Warrior...which do you want?

"Sword King!"

In the end, she liked swords more than magic.

Sword King it is.

"Hm."

As she selected the Class, a rush of mana flowed through her body until she glowed white. It looked intense, but it was comfortably warm.

"Oooh."

You okay?

"Hm. I feel myself getting stronger."

I Identified her. Her Class was Sword King now, and she had all the stat gains that came with it. She had the Class Skill too, of course. However, changing classes wasn't without its drawbacks. She lost Focus Mana and her Magic stat went down. She was more blade than mage at this point, but it seemed that our roles were set: I would focus on spells, while Fran focused on physical attacks.

Let's see what Sword God Form does...

Sword God Form: Bestows the user with the power of the Sword God.

Identify didn't reveal how much damage it did. Were all God Form Skills the same? Fortunately, Mea might know something about it. Her father possessed Spear God Form, after all. And they'd already promised to tell each other about their Class changes, so I didn't mind telling her.

As we left the Class Change Chamber, Mea came to fetch us.

"Did you pick a good Class, Fran?"

"Hm. The best."

"How exciting! Let's go back to the palace!"

This wasn't something they could talk about in public, so we quickly returned to the palace to discuss it in secret. They were getting used to confiding in each other.

"I am now a Fume Knight," Mea said.

"Cool."

"I know!" Mea said with pride. "It increases my physical fighting prowess *and* the power of my flames! It really suits me!"

Fume Knight was the advanced form of Mea's former Class, Blaze Knight. Still, Quina was quick to dampen her expectations.

"She still needs to be careful."

Oh?

"My lady has become an even greater danger to herself and those around her. Although her attack power has increased, her control remains the same. And Fume Knights are known to explode without warning."

Mea didn't have much control of her flames to begin with, and she'd picked a Class that made it worse.

"You must be even more careful now, my lady."

"I-I know that!"

"Are you sure? You must take the utmost care. You lack control as it is."

"So," Mea said, changing the subject before she could get an earful, "what did you pick, Fran?"

"Hm. Sword King," Fran said nonchalantly.

Mea spat her tea all over Fran. Thanks for that, Mea! As I was wiping Fran down, Mea asked again.

"Wh-what did you say?"

"Sword King."

"So, I wasn't hearing things!"

"A King Class..."

Even Quina looked surprised enough that I could see it on her face.

What's a King Class? I asked.

“They are the most advanced form, like Sword King and Dragoon. There’s also Flame King and Storm King.”

“You’re only the second King Class I’ve met, aside from Father...”
King Class...

“So, you’ve acquired Sword God Form, yes?” Mea asked gravely.

Apparently, the skill was so powerful that it needed no introduction.

“Hm.”

“Listen. You *must* be careful with that. In fact, make sure no one is around when you first use it.”

It’s that dangerous?

“Yes. At best, you’ll end up hurting yourself and your friends.”

I’d never seen Mea so wary about a skill before...

“It is a Self Enhancement Skill,” she said. “But it’s so powerful, it’s almost impossible to control. Even my father failed to do that.”

“How?”

“When His Highness first used Spear God Form,” said Quina, “he accidentally killed one of his party members...”

What kind of skill would cause Rigdith to become a friend-killer?

“This is assuming that Sword God form is the same type as Spear God Form.”

Right. They have similar names, but it might have different effects.

“Indeed.”

Still, they were probably of the same type, and it couldn’t hurt to be careful.

“Spear God Form powers up its user,” Mea explained, “and applies the divine element to the spear they are using.”

Divine element?

“Yes. Apparently, it is the strongest element known to man. I don’t really know the details.”

I’d heard once that Flame Immunity was useless against Divine Flame. Did that mean that the divine element was the element of the gods? That would explain its great power.

“A weapon imbued with a divine element can cut through things that are normally impossible. Spirits, Archfiends who can only be killed with Fiend Breaker, even slimes with Physical Immunity.”

Whoa... So I could use it to destroy anything and everything?

“Everything is weak against divine,” Mea said. “It ignores all resistances. But remember how I said it can cut through anything? It’s like hitting something with an element it’s weak to. There are rumors of a Divine Resistance Skill, but it’s probably even rarer than the element itself, if it exists at all.”

“Why?” Fran asked.

“Well, to get a Resistance Skill, you have to get hit a lot. That isn’t likely to happen with divine. Not only is it extremely rare, but you would die long before you could acquire the Resistance Skill.”

“I see.”

“My father was forced to use Spear God Form before he could try it out. His friend was swallowed by a dragon, and it was his only hope of saving them. It succeeded in killing the beast, but in the end, it killed his friend as well.”

The Beast King had thrown his spear with such power that it blew the dragon apart, and the upper half of his friend’s body along with it. The whole thing left a deep scar, and Rigidith vowed never to use it in the presence of his allies or men.

“Father killed a B-Threat monster with a single throw of an orihalcon spear. I can’t imagine the devastation that a powerful sword like you could wreak... I wouldn’t be surprised if you destroyed the surrounding landscape.”

Even if we held back, the aftershocks might be enough to kill.

“Also,” said Mea, “Spear God Form takes a great toll on a weapon’s durability. Father’s orihalcon spear only lasted for three seconds before it shattered.”

A chill ran down my blade as I imagined myself breaking into a million pieces. Bad things happened when a weapon was powered up beyond its capacity.

Don’t use it for too long. Got it.

“Good. The skill takes a great toll on its user too. Father could

only hold it for ten seconds.”

We should only use it when we knew it would end a fight. Still, we needed to test it.

We'll have to try it at least once.

“Hm.”

Unleash Potential and Flashing Thunderclap already used up our lifespan. Now we had another one to add to the mix. Great.

Adding to our problems was the fact that we'd skipped most of the skill acquisition process, so we weren't physically ready to use it yet. Our skill coordination, endurance, and control were subpar.

Still, I was happy that we'd gotten stronger recently. At least now we could now share the burden of Flashing Thunderclap.

We should try it out as soon as we can.

“Hm.”

“It's too dangerous to use within castle walls,” said Mea. “You'll have to leave the city.”

“She's right,” Quina agreed. “The knights will cry if they find even more holes in their beloved training grounds.”

“R-right!” said Mea. “Off we go, then!”

“Hm.”

“No, my lady. You are staying,” said Quina.

“Wh-why?!”

“I cannot allow you to be near such a dangerous skill. You never know what might happen. Besides, you don't want to be a burden to Fran, do you?”

“Urgh...” Still, Mea refused to give up. “Th-then tell my family not to blame Fran for whatever happens to me!”

She thought she'd found the perfect solution. Mea quickly turned away from Quina and put her hand on Fran's shoulder.

“Come on, let's go!”

But the maid wasn't about to let her leave so easily.

“Hold it right there.”

“Gah! Let me go!”

“No. What an absurd request.”

“Eergh! Ow ow ow!”

That’s the mythical submission hold, Pallo Special!

“Pallo...?”

N-nothing, don’t worry about it.

I didn’t think I’d see anyone execute that move in another world...

“I can’t...get loose...!”

“This is the submission hold for selfish royals I learned at the maid academy. The key is to lock the legs and shoulders.”

The princess groaned as her maid held her in that strange position.

Guess we’ll have to go by ourselves, Fran.

“Hm. Sure.”

“Stay safe out there,” said Quina.

“F-Fran! Please! Wait!” Mea pleaded.

She was desperate for us to take her along, but Fran shook her head.

“Quina’s right. Sword God Form might be dangerous. We’d better go alone.”

“Urgh...”

When Fran told her she couldn’t come, Mea finally gave up.

“We’ll head off,” said Fran.

“You’d better tell me about it later!” Mea called after.

We left the capital and found a clearing several miles away. The landscape was harsh here, and we used our Detection Skills to make sure there were no adventurers around. There were only a few monsters around, and Jet was standing guard too.

We shouldn’t run into any problems here.

You ready, Fran?

“Hm. What about you?”

Yep. I have Self-Repair and Instant Regeneration on standby.

They should make sure I didn’t get destroyed instantly, but I had

to be careful. After all, Spear God Form had destroyed an orihalcon spear in seconds.

First, we'd try activating it very briefly.

"Here I go."

Come on!

"Sword God Form...activate."

Uoooooh!

An immense power rushed through my blade. It felt different somehow, as though it didn't come from either of us, but from somewhere outside. No wonder it was difficult to control. This was borrowed power, and using borrowed equipment was always harder than using your own. After all, you didn't have time to get used to it.

But Fran wasn't wrestling with this great power alone, and I was able to control it to an extent—possibly because I was its vessel. Together, we might just get a hold of this.

Still, the power didn't feel malicious. If anything, it felt holy. The last time I felt like this was when Kiara used Black Lightning God Claw, just before her death. This time, it felt even more violent.

Hrrrrgh!

I desperately tried to control the frenzy of energy inside me. And the Beast King had managed to control all of this by himself? Those S-Ranks really were mutants.

When Fran stopped the skill, the power whirling about my blade disappeared instantly.

You okay, Fran...?

"Hm..."

She nodded. Sweat dripped down her chin, and she was panting with exhaustion. I was still reeling from this drastic change. The power had disappeared immediately, and I couldn't adjust to it in time.

Can you go again, Fran?

"No...sorry."

It's not your fault.

She hadn't fought anything, or even taken a single step when she was using the skill, but she was still exhausted after a few seconds. We

couldn't use it for very long, even if we wanted to. The ten seconds that Rigdith had managed suddenly seemed like an eternity.

"How are you doing?" Fran asked.

I think five seconds is my safe limit.

The massive energy I'd felt must have been the divine element. It took a huge chunk out of my durability. It might even be more dangerous than Unleash Potential. Even with Fran just standing there and holding me, I'd lost over a thousand points of durability in one second. After ten, I'd be on the scrap heap.

Let's take a break. Next time, we'll try attacking something.

"Hm!"

An hour later, after a healthy dose of rest, potions, and curry, Fran was ready to use Sword God Form again.

I wonder how long I can take this.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

I'll be fine. It's only a few seconds.

I was still smarting from the last time, and Instant Regeneration wasn't working. It's like being back in Aristeia's workshop—I had to wait for my natural repair abilities to kick in.

The divine element was probably the reason why Sword God Form took such a toll on me. I felt like a slime who'd just been hit with a fire attack that slowed my regeneration. If we didn't want to end up at Aristeia's again, we'd need to be careful about using this in actual combat.

All right. Let's give it a shot.

"Hm!"

I used Land Magic to form a ten-meter-wide boulder and give Fran a target. We wanted to see how much damage we could do.

"Ready?"

Bring it!

"Sword God Form!"

Kuoooooh!

And there it was! The same raging sensation whirled around my blade again.

Fran, just control your part of the power! I've got mine covered!

“Hm...!”

Fran nodded, struggling to take a step forward. Something about her had changed...

I stared at her, trying to make sure that she was still my Fran. She looked the same but, when she stared at that boulder, she felt like a different person. She approached her target and made five downward slashes.

It was just the basics. Nothing fancy. And yet, watching her move, I had goosebumps, despite my lack of skin. This was probably how characters in a sports manga felt when they were faced with pure talent. Fran's basic movements were so perfect that she could defeat anyone with ease.

Sword King Mastery allowed me to go toe-to-toe with superior fighters. It covered the difference in stats, skills, and experience, and gave me top-class swordsmanship. But in the face of just watching Fran *move*, I felt...utterly defeated.

Sword King Mastery no longer felt like the pinnacle of swordsmanship. My finest moves looked like a child waving a toy sword. Ironically, Sword King Mastery was exactly what made me feel this way. To any ordinary swordsman, it would've just looked like Fran executed a series of extremely fast cuts.

But Fran and I both knew this power transcended us, and the Sword God showed us the steep road we would have to climb to achieve this otherworldly skill.

As soon as Fran deactivated Sword God Form, the divine element disappeared, and Fran was herself again. She stood there, speechless and out of breath, just looking at me. She didn't even notice that the boulder had been cut like butter.

“What...was that?”

I don't know...

Our shock was the only thing that proved the last few strange seconds weren't a dream. Saying that Sword God Form buffed its user and her weapon was an understatement. Seeing how Fran cut through

that boulder without any additional skills, it was like it'd enhanced us beyond our limits.

Bestows the power of the Sword God... Yep. Works as advertised.

"Hm..."

We might have obtained a powerful skill, but we were both frustrated and ashamed of our previous overconfidence.

We'll get to training.

"Hm!"

Maybe Sword God Form was a Cautionary Skill, given to those with Sword King Mastery so they wouldn't get cocky. It seemed to say, "You're good, but you're no Sword God."

But that'll have to wait for another day. Let's head back. I'm exhausted...

My durability was as depleted as my mind. To make matters worse, I was recovering even more slowly than before. I guess the accumulated wear and tear was dragging me down.

Conclusion? No using Sword God Form more than once a day. I didn't want to waste all Aristeia's work.

"Hm." Fran nodded. She was reeling from the experience too. Still, her love for combat only turned her frustration into motivation.

"We'll train a bunch!"

Her energy was rubbing off on me. She was emanating it. As we headed back into town, horses shied away from her, and even adventurers did a double take when she passed by. The same thing happened in the castle. The attendants were clearly surprised, and the fearsome royal maids raised their eyebrows.

Even Raymond, the prime minister, was startled when he came to fetch her.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Hm?"

Calm down, Fran. You're dripping with motivation.

"Hm..."

I'd already told her to calm down once, but she was overflowing with battle spirit today.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re all right,” he said. “You’ve received a request, Black Lightning Princess.”

“A request?”

“Yes. You have been asked to attend the service banquet tonight.”

It was a feast for returning defense officers who’d taken part in the war. There was a separate banquet to commemorate the Beastman Nation’s victory, but that would be held upon the Beast King’s return.

I wondered whether it was a good idea to withdraw their troops so soon, but apparently, the ranks were already replenished to keep the pressure on Basharlian forces.

“So, what do I do at the banquet?” Fran asked, curious about the nature of this request. Was this just an overly formal invitation? But then, why bother phrasing it as a request? Maybe they wanted to confirm how much food Fran would plow through.

“...?”

“There’s more to it than that,” Raymond said.

“Go on.”

“We want you to attend in a rather...extraordinary manner.”

Did he want her to be someone’s bodyguard?

“You see,” he said. “We want you to wear a dress.”

“A dress?” Fran said. “Why?”

“Put simply, it’s for Princess Nemea,” said Raymond.

He had asked the princess to attend the banquet as the Beast King’s representative. Mea agreed, but she didn’t say a word about showing up in a dress. He was worried that Princess Nemea would attend to congratulate the generals as an adventurer, and nothing more.

That was where Fran came in.

“If her best friend is wearing a dress, I’m sure the princess would agree to wear one too.”

That should work. After all, Mea was happy to see that Fran’s armor was crafted by the same person as hers.

“There will be payment, of course.”

Raymond was offering a decent amount for her trouble. As Fran

thought about the offer, he elaborated on what the service banquet entailed. Although she had to dress up, the event didn't require any table etiquette. It was a banquet for fighting generals, after all. It was also all-you-can-eat.

"Hm. I'll take it."

You'll be wearing a dress. Are you sure?

No problem...slurp.

Fran wasn't picky about clothing and was completely taken in by the offer of food. She could be comfortable in a T-shirt or a gown. She preferred her usual gear because it allowed her to move freely, but wearing something more fancy and restrictive was a small price to pay to eat everything she could. Hopefully, weapons were allowed so I could keep her out of trouble.

"So," Raymond said, "you'll be attending?"

"Hm."

"Excellent! Thank you so much!" Raymond said, bowing his head.

They knew Fran didn't have any dresses of her own, so she'd be wearing one of Mea's from a few years back.

"No need for any adjustments," Raymond said to himself, eyeing Fran's chest and rear.

Mea was definitely taller, but they otherwise had the same measurements. Unlike her dynamite-bodied maid, the princess was as flat as a washboard. But Mea was still fifteen. There was still hope. Probably. Maybe.

Don't give up, Mea...

"Hm?"

Nothing, just talking to myself.

"?"

"Right this way."

"All right."

Mianoa led Fran to the royal dressing room immediately. It was an auditorium-sized room with dozens of makeup stations and wardrobes. Mianoa sat Fran down at one of the stations and cleaned her up with Cleansing Magic. Then she gave her a face massage, before

applying her makeup. The royal maids really could do anything and everything.

Fran you're so cute...

Oh, but my little Fran looked perfectly adorable in her blue-and-white dress! The flowing skirt made her look like a princess, her hair was tied up in a bun, and she was even wearing a tiara. The change of hairstyle was very cute, and the exposed nape of her neck was kind of sexy. She only needed a touch of makeup. Just a touch.

Fortunately, the makeup that Mianoa used was made specifically for beastmen, and it wasn't overly fragrant. I think that was why Fran didn't mind it. I was worried she would get antsy halfway through, but she was oddly patient. The beastman custom of serving food throughout the process probably helped. As Mianoa worked, her assistant gave Fran a steady supply of snacks and meat.

"It's...hard to move," said Fran.

That's what dresses are like, I'm afraid. You look good in it, at least.

"You think so?"

If I complimented her, maybe she'd get more into girly things.

You're just like Snow White.

"Snow White?"

She's a famous princess back in my world. She ate a poisoned apple given to her by an evil queen.

"She couldn't smell the poison...?"

Not many people in my world. They'd need to have superhuman senses.

Or highly specialized training.

The apple put her to eternal sleep, but a prince awakened her with a kiss.

"His kiss can cure poison...? What skills does he have?"

I only remember what the storybooks told me. I remembered watching a documentary about how the original Snow White story was much darker. In that version, the prince kissed a corpse. Was he a necrophiliac or something?

You know what? I don't know.

“Hmm.”

I should’ve gone with Cinderella. Then again, that story might have awful origins too.

“I shall lead you to the event hall.”

“Hm.”

The banquet wasn’t like I’d imagined. Raymond had described it as something like a drinking party, but I thought that was just to coax Fran into attending...

I guess he was telling the truth.

We were greeted by plates of food and the sound of munching and scarfing.

First, we were introduced to the guests of honor. Royalty, high nobility, and servicemen were all equally taken by Fran’s beauty. Some good-looking young men then boasted of their combat prowess to her and Mea, unaware that they were completely out of their league. Still, I couldn’t hold it against them. Fran and Mea were both very cute—Fran in her blue-and-white dress and Mea in a contrasting red-and-white one. Mea’s dress exposed her shoulders but, because of her body shape, it didn’t look risqué.

I’d taken the form of a metal choker and was currently hidden around Fran’s neck. I was worried that her days in slavery would leave her too traumatized to wear anything metal around her neck, but she didn’t seem to mind at all. Weapons were allowed, so I could’ve retained my sword form, but I wasn’t about to ruin her look. Besides, I could morph back into something more functional immediately if I needed to protect her. Aristeia’s remodeling meant I could maintain Transmogrification for longer. So long as we weren’t in combat, I could probably hold this form for several hours—more than enough for this party.

Fran and Mea had a lot of suitors, but most of them retreated soon after talking to them. Being beastmen, they knew they were in the presence of the Evolved. Fran and Mea were more like big cats than kittens. They were far stronger than those who approached them. Although their cuteness blinded their suitors to some degree.

The seasoned war veterans laughed at their younger colleagues.

“Hah! The Boulenc boy didn’t stand a chance!”

“The same goes for my men. And they did so well on the battlefield.”

“Ga ha ha! They don’t have the guts! A single glare sent them running!”

“Dammit! You boys couldn’t last ten seconds?! I had my money on five!”

There were quite a number of women among the officers. But then, female beastmen were known for their strength, so it was natural that they’d climb through the ranks.

“We are honored to have you here.”

“I heard of your fierce battles. I wish I could’ve taken part of it.”

Everyone here honored strength, and they looked at Fran with respect.

After their short (but intense) conversation, a gourmet meal was served. Once again, Fran was again the center of attention, but not for her appetite. Everyone had expected her to eat like an uneducated adventurer, but Royal Etiquette actually came in handy for once. Even Mea was surprised.

“Fran’s...doing really well.”

“I must say she conducts herself more beautifully than you, my lady.”

“I won’t deny that...”

Although Mea was doing all right. It wasn’t as though she was breaking etiquette.

“You’ll need more training if you want to beat her,” Quina prompted.

Mea nodded. “Y-you’re right...”

She was clearly shocked that her younger and wilder friend had managed to beat her in etiquette, of all things. I noticed gratitude in Quina’s eyes as she looked over at us.

The other beastmen were just as surprised. They’d never disrespected Fran, but now their opinion of her shifted from war hero to idol. An older man was even blushing, which I didn’t appreciate. I also didn’t like the way one of the younger men looked at her, although I couldn’t blame him: Fran was very beautiful. Still, if he wanted to date

her, he'd better be strong enough to support her!

In that respect, only three men here fit my criteria.

First was an old general called Varavarham. He was a Purple Wind Elephant and the defense force's supreme commander. At more than three meters tall, he loomed over the other guests. At first, I even thought he was one of the giant races. His melee prowess and a host of Command Skills marked him as a veteran general. This old man might be stronger than Gaudartha, the A-Rank beastman we'd fought during the tournament. Varavarham definitely looked like a general, although apparently, his age was getting the better of him. His physical strength was on the low side for his level, but he was still one of the best soldiers in the country. Varavarham was playing the part of a kind old uncle tonight, but no one forgot the title he'd earned in his heyday: the Destroyer King.

Next up was Ligdartha, chief of the White Rhino tribe. He was Gwendartha's father, and younger brother to Gaudartha. I'd heard that he only received the title of Chieftain because Gaudartha abdicated to serve the Beast King, but going by his abilities, I wouldn't have been able to tell. Granted, he wasn't as physically powerful as his brother, but his magic and agility more than made up for it. He even had Wind Magic 5. Ligdartha was the better all-rounder, but the White Rhino Tribe probably respected physical prowess over everything else. While his brother carried a giant battle axe, Ligdartha wielded a six-sided staff that was two meters long. I could imagine he looked terrifying on the battlefield. I don't know how he felt about Fran beating his brother. He'd greeted us earlier, but I couldn't get a read on him. He must be cut from the same cloth as Quina.

Finally, there was the man of the hour: the Land Mage Lucius Laurentia. Unlike the Fiendmancer Linford, he was quite good-looking. A quick scan of his titles revealed that there was nothing to associate him with villainy. He didn't have any Fiend-Type Skills either. Mea was right: He wasn't a bad man. And he wasn't hiding anything when he came to greet Fran earlier. If anything, he seemed like a nice, friendly young man. Not that I was going to let him have her!

Other men tried to get Fran's attention as she spoke to Mea and Lucius, but then the atmosphere suddenly changed. Privates, generals, young and old, they all turned into predators and battled for food. The full course earlier in the evening was just a passing formality. Now the

guests had the opportunity to eat their fill. It was like an afterparty right inside the party itself.

Everyone took their positions to honor the age-old beastman custom, and Fran and Mea came out on top. They pushed aside the bigger men and piled their plates with mountains of food. One of the big men fled the scene, biting back tears as he was shoved aside like crumpled paper by two little girls who stole his favorite food.

“Munch munch munch.”

Good?

“Hm!”

I was glad we’d come. Fran looked so much cuter in her dress. Although I was a little worried about whether a Cleansing spell would get it clean again if she got oil on it. We could only hope that it remained spotless for the rest of the banquet.

The bar was attached to the royal salon and, after the service banquet came to an end, we went there to look for someone.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Oh? About what?”

Lucius Laurentia. The Land Mage who bore the same surname as the Fiendmancer we’d fought in Bulbola. Ligdartha sat next to him, quietly sipping his drink while a bartender waited behind the counter. Fran glanced at both of them, unsure if she could speak.

“Don’t worry,” Lucius said. “Ligdartha is an old friend, and the bartender is a pro.”

“Do you know of Linford Laurentia?” Fran asked.

“H-how did you...? Did you meet him somewhere?”

“Hm.”

Lucius knew him, then. If they were related by blood, then we had an obligation to tell him about Linford’s death. But before Fran could say another word, Lucius bowed his head.

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing good can come from meeting that man. He must have

done something awful to you.”

Clearly, he didn’t have fond memories of Linford. Even the mention of the Fiendmancer’s name caused him great pain.

“As his son, I apologize.”

His son? But there was such an age gap! Linford would have to have him while he was sixty... unless they were elves or members of another long-lived race. Still, I could imagine the Fiendmancer getting down to it, even at that age. Eugh.

Fran stared at Lucius in shock.

Okay, I didn’t think he was his son. Maybe we shouldn’t tell him.

We had no way of knowing how Lucius would react to the news that we’d killed his father, but Fran remained adamant.

No. We should tell him precisely because he’s his son, she said.

Meanwhile, Lucius read Fran’s silence as anger. “I don’t suppose my apologies will never be enough to gain your forgiveness.”

“It’s not like that,” she said. “I’m just surprised you’re his son.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And I’m the one who should apologize.”

“Apologize...for what?”

“For killing him,” she said, somewhat nervously. She proceeded to tell Lucius about how she and a group of adventurers had defeated the Fiendmancer in Bulbola.

“So...Linford is...”

As much pain as Linford put him through, he was still Lucius’ father. We hoped that he wouldn’t attack us and braced for whatever came next.

“He’s...dead?” Lucius asked.

It looked like the shock was too great.

“Hm... I’m sorry.”

“No! You don’t need to apologize! You were protecting Bulbola!”

“But...”

“No! No, if anything,” Lucius said. “I should be thanking *you*.”

“Hm?”

“I’ve spent *years* tracking him down so that I could finish him off,” Lucius said, his face darkening with vengeance.

He’d suffered for being the son of the notorious Fiendmancer, and his resentment clearly wasn’t just to make Fran feel better.

“Thank you,” he said. “You stopped him from hurting anyone else...”

Lucius got down on his knees, formed a fist with his right hand, and wrapped his left around it in a sign of utmost respect. I didn’t need Essence of Falsehood to know he was telling the truth.

“After all these years, my quest is over. I can finally rejoice when I visit my mother’s grave.”

Tears streamed down his face. Ligdartha bowed his head to Fran.

“Thank you for solving my friend’s problem.”

“Thank you...thank you so much,” Lucius sobbed.

Ligdartha helped his tearful friend back to his room. Linford must’ve really weighed down on him. I was glad that Fran had the courage to tell him.

That was nice.

“Hm!”

Once they were gone, we heard a clinking sound. The bartender was smiling at us as he prepared a drink.

“Here you go, little lady.”

“What’s this?”

“Milk with the juice of crushed fruits.”

“But I didn’t ask for it.”

“On the house,” was all he said.

It was all he needed to say. This bartender was really cool!

“Thanks.”

As Fran downed the fruity milk, a maid approached. She probably worked under Quina or Mianoa, and she seemed to want Fran for something.

“Lady Fran, may I have a moment of your time?”

“What is it?”

“Prime Minister Raymond wishes to talk to you.”

“Hm. Sure.”

“Thank you.”

Whatever it was, it couldn't be too bad. Or so I hoped. The Prime Minister had always been friendly with her.

“That milk was good.”

“Do come again.”

After we said goodbye to the bartender, the maid led us to Raymond's office. From the second you stepped in, the Prime Minister's room was exquisite.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Hm.”

Fran took a plush chair and Raymond sat behind his large desk. The air was quite serious.

“First of all, allow me to thank you for attending the service banquet.”

“Hm.”

“Thanks to you, Princess Nemea's ratings have gone up.”

The whole point was to raise Mea's popularity, and Raymond was pleased. The people and officers respected Mea, but the ministers would be more comfortable around her if she was a little more calm and polite.

“As a side effect, however,” Raymond said, “your ratings have also increased. Still, you helped us achieve our goals.”

I mean, you couldn't exactly blame Fran for being supernaturally cute.

“I would also like to extend my thanks for your help with the war. Indeed, I cannot thank you enough.”

“That's all right. I just did what I had to.”

“Aah, you are just as His Highness said.”

“You've been talking to him?”

“We've been exchanging messages, yes. We have to reward you,

you see.”

“Reward?”

“Yes. After all you’ve done, we can’t let you leave empty-handed.”

No one asked Fran to fight, so she wasn’t expecting a reward. But she’d practically saved the country, and that made her a national hero. The government couldn’t let her walk away without acknowledging that somehow. It would make for very bad optics.

But now I was starting to worry. What if Fran suffered the fate of so many light novel heroes, and was forced to take a fiefdom? She had no need for official titles, and no interest in becoming a noble. It would make things difficult, and besides, she wouldn’t know how to manage a fiefdom if she had one.

“It was our opinion that, for your unparalleled service in the war, you should be made a baron.”

Damn it!

I had to think of a way to refuse...

“But His Highness rejected the idea,” Raymond continued. “He said that such a thing would not please you.”

Thank you, Beast King.

“Hm. I don’t need it.”

“But you could claim the Black Cat village for yourself,” Raymond said, perplexed.

“The count of Green Goat is looking after them. And I’m not cut out to be a noble. I’d only get in everyone’s way.”

“I see. Very well.”

Fran actually gave valid reasons for refusing, instead of just pointing out how much of a pain it would be. She really was growing up.

“Then we will have to pursue alternatives... Guiza, if you will.”

“Yes sir.”

There was a canine beastman seated behind Raymond. He looked like a shiba. When Raymond called him, he took up an empty seat at the desk.

“I am Guiza, Minister of Finance.”

I wasn't expecting that. Still, he had the grave look of a financial advisor. Sharp, calculating eyes, an unsmiling mouth. He looked like the personification of seriousness, and I couldn't imagine him giving away loans any time soon.

"First," he said. "I would like to clarify where the two parties stand."

"What?"

"First, Lady Fran. You fought as a free collaborator without orders from our country or quests from the guild. Correct?"

"Hm."

"In that case, you will receive the same payment as other collaborators in your position."

According to Beastman National law, local collaborators were rewarded for their efforts in war. Fran would be rewarded in the same way.

But how did you measure someone's contribution? Let's say our party was fighting monsters. One of us was a doctor who stayed up all night tending to the sick, another was a merchant who gave us his goods for free. It was hard to say who'd made the bigger sacrifice, and that was assuming they believed us when we told them what we'd done.

Guiza wasn't calling Fran a liar, but there were lots of people like her who protected their country without any witnesses, and they might take issue with Fran being rewarded for it. No one wanted Fran to be treated differently for reporting her own victories. If the government made an exception for her, they'd have to make exceptions for everyone.

I guess that was their way of saying that they'd tried their best to reward her, but she shouldn't expect that much.

Fran nodded casually. "That's fine."

She wasn't in it for the money and knew she'd cause trouble by asking for more. Personally, I thought a small reward was better than picking a fight with an entire country.

"E-even so," Raymond continued hastily. "You must understand that we do not wish to undermine your accomplishments."

He must have been planning to negotiate. When Fran accepted

their lowest offer, she threw him off.

“Indeed,” Guiza agreed. “If you received the same reward as the rest, we would lose future collaborators.”

They all knew that they weren’t in the same ballpark as Fran. Still, the independent collaborator law was there for a reason, and they couldn’t just make an exception for her.

“So,” said Guiza. “We have another suggestion. We let it be known that you were fighting alongside Princess Nemea and received orders to push back the monster army. How does that sound?”

“Huh?” Fran tilted her head.

“Let me start with the negatives,” Guiza continued. “One, if we go with this story, then some of your glory will go to Princess Nemea instead of you. Two, you will broadcast to the world you are aligned with the Beastman Nation, which may limit your movement through enemy states. However, since Basharl is our only enemy at the moment, that isn’t much of a drawback.”

“I see.”

“On the positive side, the publication of your achievements will go a long way in elevating the reputation of the Black Cat tribe.”

Fran would become a national hero. Once people knew what she’d achieved, they’d start looking at the Black Cats differently. Of course, Mea would get some of the credit for enlisting a fearsome warrior like Fran to begin with.

“If we say that you were acting under royal orders, we can reward you differently from other independent collaborators.”

Acting under Mea’s command would allow for special treatment. Fran might even get a bonus for saving a member of the royal family. The only real drawback was that, according to the official story, Fran wouldn’t just have been acting to save the Black Cats. Still, if the government publicly acknowledged her deeds, it would be better for both her and her tribe. Meanwhile, Princess Mea would grow even more popular. It was that, or accept the lower reward. We had a choice to make.

Teacher?

Let me think...

It depended on the reward, really. We needed to know what it was.

“And if I took that option?” Fran asked.

“You will be honored with the Golden Beast Fang medal.”

“A medal?”

“Yes,” said Guiza. “It is the Beastman Nation’s highest honor. Kiara will be posthumously given the same award. You would be the first living person to receive it in three hundred years.”

If Fran accepted, two Black Cat heroes would be added to the annals of Beastman National history. It would doubtless be a source of inspiration for generations to come.

“Honorary titles are not the only reward, of course,” he said. “The medal also comes with a monetary reward with no set limit. What this means is that we will be able to reward you with any amount we choose, Lady Fran.”

The award took the fluctuating value of money into account, so there was no specific value.

“This time, we have seen fit to award you with ten million gold.”

Ten million?!

“Hm. Got it.”

Fran, please, it’s ten million gold! That was a hundred million Earth yen! How can you stay calm?!

Fran! Ten million gold!

Hm.

I tried to get her excited but still got nothing. Her innocence only highlighted how shallow I was. I don’t know what I was expecting, really.

Could I buy everything on the menu with that...? Fran asked.

You could buy the whole restaurant if you wanted.

Yum.

Never mind. Her innocence was nothing more than a failure to grasp the amount. At least she knew the scale of it now.

“Ten million gold and you don’t bat an eye. You are formidable

indeed, Lady Fran...”

She still had wants...it’s just that they mostly revolved around combat and food.

“I don’t mind getting less,” she said. “As long as you help the Black Cats.”

“Oh?” Guiza raised his eyebrow. “You truly *are* a lady of few desires, just as His Highness said. Very well. I shall take it into account.”

“Hm.”

“As much as we would love for you to accept our offer,” said Guiza. “There is one other option that we are obliged to tell you about.”

“What is it?” Fran asked.

“The Golden Beast Fang medal would do a great amount of good for you, Princess Nemea, and our country. However, another organization has made an offer.”

“Who?”

“The Adventurer’s Guild,” Guiza said.

I wasn’t expecting that. The guild stayed out of politics. They didn’t even take sides during national wars. I could see them wanting to buy our materials, but it seemed unlikely they’d reward us for defending the Beastman Nation.

“War does not carry much weight with the guild,” he said. “Adventurers who fight in them are treated as volunteer soldiers. And protecting the city, or helping its citizens evacuate, is the duty of any good soldier.”

Raymond and Guiza frowned. It was tough to accept that everything Fran had done wouldn’t carry much weight with the guild. But ultimately, they had to concede that the Adventurer’s Guild was politically neutral.

“However, guild executives have expressed concerns about your case.”

“What kind of concerns?”

“Namely, the dungeon,” said Guiza. “Somehow, Basharl figured out how to control it *and* all its monsters, and dungeons are very much under the guild’s jurisdiction.”

“Some members feel that the Adventurer’s Guild should have done something about the situation.”

The northern invasion was more of a dungeon stampede than a war, so some people thought the guild should have handled it. But really, it was more like an act of God. The invasion was orchestrated by someone who could control monsters, and the dungeon was heretofore undiscovered.

“We have no qualms with the work the guild did during the conflict,” he said. “However, some feel that they should have intervened, and if that feeling spreads, it will not look good for the guild. They want to make a public statement to dissipate any anxiety about the matter.”

They were only following precedent by not getting involved, but it might not have been the best way forward. And Fran wasn’t just a national hero, she was also an adventurer. If she was working on behalf of the guild, that meant they could take some of the glory.

“But now that the war is over,” said Raymond. “There is nothing more the guild can do.”

“That is,” said Guiza, “unless you want it to be so.”

“What do you mean?” Fran asked, tilting her head.

“It is similar to the story where you were following Princess Nemea’s orders. Only, in this case, the guild issued you with a special quest.”

They could offer it to Fran retroactively.

“With this option, you will get far less monetary reward, and would not receive the Golden Beast Fang medal, as you would not have been acting under the princess’ orders.”

That meant we’d get the standard collaborator reward.

“For completion of this special quest,” said Guiza. “The guild will reward you with five million gold.”

If he could speak for the guild like this, he must have spoken to them. We’d get less money with this option, and may also offend an entire country by refusing their greatest award.

“However,” Guiza went on. “It would improve your standing in the guild, and you would be promoted to B-Rank. They would owe you

that much for saving the country and winning them back some favor.”

Promotions got much harder beyond C-Rank, so an instant boost would be much appreciated—even if it came with monetary sacrifice. Even more importantly, the guild would owe us a favor.

“We do not mind which option you take.”

“Take your time to think about it.”

I got the feeling that they’d prefer to make Fran a national hero. Raymond and Guiza were being very friendly, and they were careful to seem neutral, but they were probably just trying to avoid looking pushy. The Beastman Nation told her about the guild’s offer to show her they were being honest, but they also had the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance present her with these choices. That made it pretty hard to refuse. A pretty good negotiation tactic on their part.

Teacher?

Your call, Fran.

Hm. All right.

Both options benefited Fran. They’d negotiated well, but they had no intention to trick us. Whichever choice Fran made, I was happy.

“Sleep on it. It’s a big decision.”

“We hope to hear back from you in the morning.”

“No need,” said Fran. “I want the medal.”

“Oh. Are you sure?”

I wasn’t expecting her to choose that. I thought she would’ve preferred the guild promotion.

“I want the same award as Kiara.”

“And you shall have it. We shall make arrangements at once.”

“Hm.”

Ah, so that was her reason. I hoped she stayed like this forever.

“We shall contact the guild for you.”

They must have been in contact with the Adventurer’s Guild already to work out their options. The fact that Guiza ended up presenting both choices showed they’d probably come out on top.

“On that matter, would you care to sell your abundance of

monster materials to the Adventurer's Guild, Lady Fran?"

"There's no time..."

We could only carve so many of our materials back at Aristeia's mansion, and most of them were still in their raw form. If we sold them whole, the guild would deduct the carving cost from our final payout, and Fran wasn't about to cancel her plans with Mea so she could spend the whole day carving them herself.

"It would soften the blow to the guild for not accepting their offer," said Guiza.

"All my parts are still whole. I can't carve them in time."

"Still, you must sell them at some point. Is it just a matter of carving cost?"

"Hm."

"Then do not worry about it. The guild will send their carvers and appraisers to the castle, and use the royal training grounds to do their work. As a show of goodwill, we've offered to have our own carvers help them, and I will see to it that the carving costs are borne by the guild. Will that help?"

The guild must have done their homework if they anticipated that Fran wouldn't part with the uncarved parts. Even if it meant playing to their tune, there was no reason for us to refuse at this point. I just hoped that we could get paid before the carving was done.

Let's do it, Fran.

"Hm. Sounds good."

"Thank you."

Negotiations concluded, Mea led us through the palace.

"Wow...!"

Yeah, this is amazing.

"Mwa ha ha!" Mea laughed. "I know!"

We were in the royal baths, a palatial bath house reserved for royalty and their guests. I'd seen some extravagant bath houses before, but this one took the cake.

The walls were made of marble, and water gushed from the

mouths of tiger statutes. A manatech chandelier hung from a fresco of mythical dancing heroes. Apparently, the paintings on the ceiling and walls were replaced every three months.

Decorative trees grew around the swimming-pool-sized bathtub. They must have been over a hundred years old. If they'd been growing next to a temple back home, they would probably have been treated as sacred. The trees were filled with mana, and their fruit had healing effects when eaten. They could be sold for a lot of money, but they were left to float around in the water, imbuing it with medicinal properties. It wasn't a terribly efficient way to get the benefits, but it was mostly used to impress visiting messengers and ambassadors.

At first, I didn't think that the Beast King would build something so extravagant, but then I remembered his flashy personality. Perhaps it wasn't so far-fetched after all.

"First, we wash!"

"Hm."

Mea took Fran to a washing station with expensive soaps and shampoos and explained the differences between them.

I was expecting a platoon of servants, but Quina was the only one there. I guess beastman royals only used one servant to help them bathe, and apparently, Rigdith hated being waited on.

"Come," said Mea. "I'll wash your back."

"Hm."

Their friendship was so beautiful. Fran and Mea scrubbed each other's backs and washed each other's hair. Fran had finally made a friend. It was enough to make me tear up.

That's how it should be.

"You're next, Teacher."

"Allow me to help!" said Mea. "You've been a great aid to us!"

Fran didn't feel embarrassed around me, and Mea didn't seem to mind that I used to be a human man. She probably just thought of me as a sword. I didn't feel the slightest lust for either of them, but I wondered whether it was appropriate for them to be scrubbing a sword with a soft sponge.

"You'll shine so much that Fran will see herself in you!" said Mea.

“Hm!”

But Quina was definitely not okay with it. She was still wearing her bathwear, which looked like a tube top, and scooped me out of Fran and Mea’s hands.

“What are you doing, Quina?”

“Hm.”

“Teacher may be like family to Fran,” said Quina. “But he is a complete stranger to you, my lady. Please, show some restraint.”

“Who cares?” said Mea. “He’s a sword.”

“I care very much, thank you. If I may borrow you for a while, Teacher.”

Quina took a piece of cloth and wrapped it around the wolf emblem on my pommel. She thought that she was blindfolding me. In fact, I could see by using my entire body. A little blindfold wouldn’t make a difference.

But should I tell her, or not?

I thought of staying quiet to give Quina peace of mind, but if she found out later...there would be hell to pay.

Well, honesty’s the best policy, as I always say.

Uhh, that’s not going to work. I see my surroundings with skills rather than physical eyes.

“Really?”

Yes.

“So you’ve been seeing my lady naked this whole time?”

Y-yes.

“I see.”

I was terrified. I had no idea how angry she might be.

“There are consequences when an ordinary man sees the bare skin of the princess,” Quina said.

Wait, was she saying I had to marry Mea?

“But seeing that you are a man of character,” she went on. “And a sword at that, so you will not be forced to marry her.”

Brash as she was, Mea was still the princess of the Beastman

Nation. There were surely dire consequences to seeing her naked.

“See! He’s a sword, so there won’t be any problems! Right, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“Teacher,” Quina started. “Just cast your gaze elsewhere, please?”

G-got it.

And so, I found myself observing the fine details of the fresco on the ceiling until we got out of the baths. By the time we were done, I’d pretty much memorized them. Every time I got distracted and my gaze wandered, Quina noticed. She probably sensed my mana flow with Presence Sense, Interrogate, Mana Sense, and Mana Control, along with her Assassin Killer title. That woman could draw cold sweat out of steel.

When we got out of the baths, supper was waiting for us.

“Wow,” said Fran. “That’s a lot of food.”

“Mwa ha ha! Eat up, eat up!”

The menu was excellent, and supper felt more like a banquet. It was served in Mea’s room and, once again, Quina was the only one waiting on us.

“It’s good,” Fran said, munching.

Mea gobbled down her own food. “I know!”

“My lady,” said Quina. “Do not talk with your mouth full.”

“Hmhrgh!”

“I have no idea what you just said.”



They ate without a care for etiquette, which was much more their style anyway. It was the first time in a while that Fran had eaten food cooked by someone other than me, but she seemed quite satisfied with it. Compliments to the royal chefs.

The meal was a carnivore carnival with one meat dish after another. There was beef rolled in pork, chicken with a side of lizard, meat salads, even meat soups. I was worried they would get heartburn, but they plowed through without showing any discomfort. It was probably because they were carnivores. As a tapir beastman, Quina preferred vegetables. I thought it must be tough to be a beastman cook, but Quina explained that, since beastmen were humanoids, they ate a largely humanoid diet of meat, vegetables, and fish. Beastmen weren't picky eaters, so having whatever you wanted was considered a statement of class.

“Do you like it, Jet?”

Jet munched happily in reply.

“Excellent! Have some more!”

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet ate as much of the royal food as they could. After all, it wasn't like they'd be able to enjoy this every night.

Chapter 5: Black Cat Hero

WE'D PLANNED TO SIGHTSEE and do some sparring on our second day. The elite mages had fixed the training grounds without even crying about it, and Fran and Mea had wrecked it again before the day was over. But right now, we weren't in Bestia.

"That road looks familiar."

"Indeed! We're closing in on Green Goat!"

Fran, Mea, and Quina were currently in the sky—headed toward Green Goat on Lind's back.

"We're almost there, Lind! You can do it!"

"Kuoooo!"

Lind had been in the air since this morning, and it was beginning to wear him down. He might not be able to fight when we landed, but we were in a hurry.

"To think that Fiends have attacked again..."

This morning, the Adventurer's Guild had brought unbelievable news: Green Goat was under attack.

A few hours before, the carvers from the Adventurer's Guild were at the palace.

"This is...quite a haul."

"Ha ha ha... Hah."

They could only let out a wry laugh at the mountain of monster remains. There were about a hundred fifty monsters in total, and the vice guildmaster had wanted them all. That was all well and good, but the carvers probably couldn't get it done in a day.

Fran had managed to crack open shells and kill tough monsters with pinpoint blows. The submaster winced, forced to admit that she was the real deal.

"W-we'll do our best to carve all this by tomorrow morning!" he

said. "You can expect payment by then too."

"Hm."

It didn't take long for his fear to turn to awe. He looked at Fran like the national hero she was. That was the nice thing about beastmen: they always acknowledged strength.

"By the way," he said. "Have you heard? They say Green Goat is under attack again."

"By what? Monsters?"

"Fiends, apparently. They requested backup the other day."

"Will they be okay?" Fran asked.

"They can handle it for now, but they want their adventurers back ASAP."

If they'd called for backup, then the attack must be out of the ordinary.

Teacher...

You wanna go check it out?

Hm.

We didn't have any plans today, aside from training with Mea, and she would understand. After all, she cared about her people. Still, how would we get to Green Goat in time? Jet could take us there by tonight, but even if we did some quick and dirty Fiend-hunting, it would still be the day after tomorrow by the time we got back.

Let's talk to Mea.

"Hm."

About an hour later, Mea had made her decision.

"You'll be riding with me, Fran."

"Hm."

"Quina, make sure Fran doesn't fall."

"Very well."

And that's how we all ended up riding Lind. Honestly, I should've expected this. If Mea's people were in danger, there was no way she'd sit around and do nothing. Good thing too. Lind made air travel a lot easier, and he could maintain top speed for longer than Jet. The weight

of three people slowed him down a bit, but he could make a straight line for Green Goat. We should get there by the afternoon. The sooner, the better.

“Take us to Green Goat, Lind! On the double!”

“Luoooo!”

Lind flew to Green Goat without stopping. Although the dragon hadn’t yet reached his full potential, he was still much faster than any wyvern or drake.

Mea munched. “This thing you call curry bread is exquisite!”

Quina chewed. “Indeed. Delicious, easy to eat, and has all the necessary nutrients. It has been a long time since I’ve felt outclassed in cooking.”

“Teacher!” said Mea. “I haven’t seen Quina eat so feverishly in a long time!”

“Hm! Teacher’s cooking is the best in the world,” said Fran. “And curry’s the best dish of them all. He’s the ultimate chef.”

“I can see why...!”

I couldn’t. Fran’s judgment was completely skewed by curry. She measured everything else against it. I was confident in my cooking, but I wouldn’t consider myself the best in the world!

They ate the curry bread while perched on Lind’s back. I expected Mea to go through it like a glutton, but in the end, it was more of a hit with Quina. The maid somehow managed to plow through ten of them and still maintain her slender figure. It must be a testament to her tribal genetics.

By the time we finished the feast, our destination was in sight.

“Green Goat ahead!” Mea shouted, pointing at the shadow of the city in the distance.

At Lind’s current speed, we’d get there in a few minutes.

“Here’s the plan,” said Mea. “We kill any Fiend we find lurking outside.”

“Hm.”

Sounds good to me. There shouldn’t be that many.

“Still, there shouldn’t be *any* of them since we destroyed that dungeon,” Mea said.

“Yeah.” Fran agreed. “What gives?”

When a dungeon was destroyed, all of its monsters and Fiends died.

“Maybe they’re from outside the dungeon,” Quina suggested.

“Now? Of all times?” Mea said.

“It’s too convenient,” Fran agreed.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. All I’m saying is: if these Fiends weren’t destroyed with the dungeon, then they must come from somewhere else.”

Fiend hordes were a regular occurrence. While some dungeons (like the one in Alessa) did produce goblins, they were also known to dig out caves and create hordes themselves.

Still, Mea was right: the timing was far too convenient. After all, this attack came right on the heels of Murelia’s defeat...

“Over there!” Mea shouted, pointing.

“Where?” Fran asked, craning her neck to get a better view. Her face stiffened. “Goblins!”

And they have animals with them!

Outside Green Goat, a squad of beastmen was locked in combat. There were thirty monsters in total, and the goblins had bears and wolves. The five adventurers fighting against them were struggling to stay alive.

“I’m going in. Teacher!”

Okay! Mea, you go on to Green Goat! Let’s hope it’s still in one piece!

Mea nodded. “Very well! We’re counting on you all!”

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Fran jumped off Lind’s back in midair, and Jet leapt out of her shadow to follow.

No area of effect attacks. We don’t want to hurt the adventurers.

“Got it.”

Jet, you're fast. You go after the wolves.

"Woof!"

We accelerated our fall with Air Hop. Neither the adventurers nor the monsters saw us coming. But then, adventurers were greenhorns, and the monsters were only goblins.

"Here we go."

"Grrr!"

I'll heal the adventurers.

Fran paralyzed the goblins with a Thunder spell and Jet finished them off with shadow spears. Finally, the forces fighting on the ground noticed us. Goblins and adventurers alike stared at us, slack jawed.

"Huh? What was that?"

"My wounds are healed..."

"What's a kid doing here?!"

You guys should stop gaping and press the offensive!

But we couldn't wait for them to come to their senses. We loosed a volley of spells, and Fran landed between the monsters and the adventurers. She cut down any goblin that was still standing, crushed the heads of the ones that were paralyzed on the ground, and killed the animals with more spells. The whole thing was over in under three minutes.

"You...you saved us."

"Did you heal us too?"

"Hm."

"Wow! You don't see many fighters who can heal like that!"

"And that wolf of yours? What a familiar!"

"You can use magic *and* fight with a sword? That's amazing!"

As confused as they were, they knew that Fran wasn't their enemy. I would miss this beastman hospitality when we left this place.

Eventually, one of them recognized her.

"Wait a minute! I know you..."

"Keep it down! No need to shout. Is she new here?"

“No. Think about it,” said the girl. “Black Cat, amazing swordsmanship, giant direwolf familiar. Doesn’t that sound like the Black Lightning Princess?”

The realization dawned on them.

“Now that you mention it...!”

“It’s her!”

“B-but I thought the Black Lightning Princess was supposed to be Evolved...”

We’d activated Stealth Evolution in the capital. All the attention was getting tiresome.

Should I turn it off? Fran asked.

Not yet.

If they knew her real identity, they might hold us up. And we needed to get to Green Goat as fast as possible. Still, there was something wrong with the bear that Jet had killed.

“Woof.”

“What is it, Jet?” Fran asked.

“Woof!”

It’s rotten.

Jet’s Deadly Venom Magic accelerated the rate of decay, but it might have hit the adventurers if he’d used it. He’d only been using Shadow spells.

Was it rotten when you started fighting? I asked.

Woof.

Sure was lively for a rotting bear. Must be undead.

These other animals are rotten too, Fran noted.

The wolves and monkeys also showed signs of decay. You could control zombies with magic, but there weren’t any necromancers amongst the goblins we’d just killed. None of them had Undead Control, so something else must be doing this, and it was in cahoots with the local goblins. It was probably a Goblin King or a sorcerer.

“Hey,” said Fran.

“Y-yes?”

“Do you get zombies around here?”

“No. We’re based in Green Goat, and this is the first time we’ve seen them around here.”

“I see.”

Necromancers and goblins. One had the ability to control corpses, and the other could multiply in great numbers. A dangerous combination.

“Hrm.”

Teacher?

Grr!

You feel something?

Something weird’s looking at us.

I could feel it staring from a distance. The air shivered with mana. They were probably observing us with some kind of spell.

Can you blink to it, boy?

Arf.

It was too far away for Jet, and I wasn’t good at teleporting blind. Still, Fran and Jet knew exactly where it was, so I could at least work on their hunch.

All right. We’ll have to work fast. I’ll get us as close as I can, then it’s up to you to take it down.

Got it.

We didn’t know what we were up against. If it had anything to do with Murelia, we might have to get out of there. However, when I teleported us closer, we found our observer was a lot weaker than I’d thought.

“Gyagaaa!”

The goblin might have a stealth specialization, but its fighting skills were nothing special. It tried to teleport away, but Fran cut it down before it had the chance.

“A pitch-black goblin?”

It’s a Corrupt Goblin.

The prefix Corrupt was given to creatures with the Evil One’s

Grace. Unfortunately, this was not the necromancer we were looking for, and whoever we were *really* up against had Corrupt Goblins under their command. Not good.

We'll keep it for now. Onward to Green Goat.

"Hm."

We bid farewell to the adventurers and went on our way. It didn't take long for us to reach the city walls.

"A lot of people here," said Fran.

A lot of soldiers. I guess there's goblins here too.

"There's Mea."

Fran motioned to the white-haired girl giving orders to the town guard. Mea looked completely at home, and the guards didn't resent the young girl for giving them instructions either. She was royalty, indeed.

"Fran, you made it!" Mea said. "How were things on your side?"

"The adventurers will be all right."

"Excellent!"

"You had enemies here too?" Fran asked.

"That we did."

By the time they arrived, the Green Goat guards were already being pushed back by minotaurs. Were they part of the same force as the goblins? The rookies might have come under attack before they could reach the city gates. Fortunately, Mea and Quina arrived just in time to save town.

"I don't think they're wild Fiends," said one of the guards. "They came at us with battering rams."

"They would've broken through the gates if you hadn't shown up."

Minotaurs and battering rams were the perfect recipe for broken gates.

"Did you see any necromancers?" Fran asked.

"Necromancers? I don't know. Quina?"

"Not that I could tell. Then again, you *did* slaughter half of them instantly, my lady."

Mea winced. “I-I had to. The whole town was in danger!”

I looked at the roasted pile of corpses outside the gates. They were certainly Mea’s handiwork.

“But I think I saw some zombies. Did you see them on your end too?”

“Hm,” said Fran. “Zombie bears and wolves.”

“So, the Fiends are working with necromancers...”

“And look at this.”

Fran took out the remains of the Corrupt Goblin.

“We had a few of these too.”

“This may turn out to be a serious threat.”

“That it may.”

If there was one goblin, there’d be a horde of them. And now we had Corrupt Goblins too? A single one might have evolved in the wild, but multiple Corrupt Goblins meant that more were on the way.

“We’ll get the crystals out of the Corrupt Goblins and burn the rest before they turn into undead.”

“Good idea.”

Despite being Corrupted, goblin materials weren’t worth much. That said, the Malice in Corrupt Goblin crystals was a cut above other corrupted monsters.

“I guess there’s no saving the rest of the materials,” a guild carver said under his breath, mourning the loss of minotaur and orc materials.

They’d made up the bulk of the frontlines, and so they were the first to be burned by Mea’s flames. They were mostly charcoal at this point, and only good for their crystals.

Quina stared at the princess. “My lady.”

“I-I had no choice!” Mea protested. “I had to protect the city!”

“It is true that you helped prevent the Fiends from breaking down the gates.”

“Right?”

“But was there no cleaner way to do it?” First the carrot, then the stick. Quina knew how to play her. “You could’ve set the gates on fire

with your flames. And did it not occur that you could've caused a forest fire?"

"W-well..."

"If you keep using your power with reckless abandon, Fran will leave you in the dust," Quina said.

Mea groaned and glanced at Fran. Quina was right: Mea knew full well that Fran had been practicing to control her skills.

"I'll be more careful next time," she said.

"See that you do."

"If you don't mind," a guildsman asked timidly. "I don't suppose we could continue this conversation in the guild?"

The guildsman looked deathly nervous as he led Fran and the others to the guild. Mea hadn't introduced herself, but he knew he was dealing with high nobility. After all, her maid had called her "my lady," and Mea certainly spoke the part. Not to mention the fact that she'd burned all those Fiends in one fell swoop. He seemed to recognize Fran too. The guildsman was literally stuck between a lion and a tiger.

He got us some kebabs and tea, then told us to wait. A few minutes later, an old dog beastman wearing mage garb came in. He was sweating. I hoped it was nothing serious.

"Prin—Lady Mea!"

"It's been a while, Leboeuf."

I guess Green Goat's guildmaster knew Mea's true identity.

"First," he said. "I would like to thank you and the Black Lightning Princess for saving our town."

"I am only doing my duty," Mea said. "The royal family is responsible for the safety of its people."

"And I was fighting to save my friends," said Fran.

"I see... Either way, you prevented Fiends from invading. Your friends should be quite safe, Black Lightning Princess."

"Good to know."

Mea had taken down two hundred of those things with her attack.

“So,” he said. “Have you found out what we’re up against?”

“Of sorts,” said Mea. “Look at this.”

She and Quina showed him the Corrupt Goblin crystals and told him what they’d seen. We didn’t know much at the moment, but this clearly wasn’t an ordinary goblin stampede. The biggest question on everyone’s minds was: who was leading the assault?

“This Fiend attack can hardly be a coincidence,” Mea said.

“You mean to say Basharl has something to do with this...?” Leboeuf asked.

“That I do. The timing is far too convenient.”

“I suppose it is...”

If Mea had already destroyed the horde’s commander, then all well and good. But what if they were still out there and mounting another attack?

“Goblins should run away after the main force is defeated,” Fran said. “But they kept coming after us.”

“You think the commander is still at large?”

“Those Fiends wouldn’t keep fighting otherwise.”

“True. I shall issue a quest for adventurers to scout the surroundings, and ask the town guard for help too.”

“We’ll do some digging of our own,” said Mea. “Where did these goblins come from?”

“Patrolmen spotted them coming from the north.”

“The north...”

Fran was immediately worried.

Teacher...do you think Schwarz Katze is okay?

I don't think those monsters would destroy an abandoned village...

But the Black Cats wouldn’t be able to return if the Fiends were still around. The danger of attack was too high.

“You seem tense, Fran,” Mea said. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll help you look.”

“All right. Let’s see who can find the enemy commander first!”

“Hm!”

They nodded and went on their way. Mea needed to see Count Marmano, and Fran wanted to check in on her friends. As we approached the encampment, Salutia was the first one to spot us. She was always happy to see Fran.

“Princess?! I thought you were supposed to be in the capital. Are you the one who defeated the Fiends just now?”

“Most of that was Mea. I helped a little.”

“And who is this Lady Mea?”

“A friend.”

“I see! This friend of yours must be very strong!”

“Hm. Very.”

“Aww, I hope I can fight alongside you one day, princess,” Salutia said, brushing the sword at her side. She was using a spear the last time we saw her.

Had she switched it on a whim?

“I know a spear’s easier for a beginner,” said Salutia, staring at Fran. “But you and Lady Kiara inspired me, I couldn’t help myself.”

“I see.”

Fran nodded, but she seemed happy to have someone look up to her. And to continue Kiara’s legacy.

“You don’t think it’s silly?” Salutia asked.

“No. You can master it if you try.”

“Thank you! I’m working to get Fire Magic too. I hope I can fight with them both soon!”

“Hm.”

The other Black Cats nodded. They needed to get stronger for their own sake, but also for Fran and Kiara. They were nothing like the trembling wrecks we’d first met. Everyone was prepared to get stronger, especially those of them holding weapons.

We talked to them for a while, but time was short.

“I have to get going,” Fran said.

“Okay...good luck out there, princess!”

“Oh, don’t get hurt!”

“Go get ’em, princess.”

“May the gods be with you!”

Everyone saw her off. Salutia, the elder, the village fighters, the children, even the elderly.

“We’re going to protect Schwarz Katze,” Fran said.

You got it!

“Woof!”

Their resolve was bolstered by the Black Cat’s support, and we left Green Goat in the hopes of finding and eliminating our enemy. But it wasn’t going to be that easy.

About an hour later, we’d searched the area around Schwarz Katze. I used all my Sense Skills, and Jet had his superior sniffer, but we still couldn’t find anything.

There’s nothing near the village...

“Woof...”

Even when we surveyed the area from the sky, there weren’t any Fiends in sight. Perhaps they’d all fled from the powerful mana of Murelia’s army.

“Nothing but small monsters,” said Fran.

Not a single orc or goblin.

Should we keep looking?

“Of course.”

All right. Let’s get lower so Jet can sniff them out.

“Got it.”

But even then, we came up blank. It looked like there was nothing here.

Let’s head back to Green Goat. Maybe the other adventurers have found something.

“All right.”

If there was no new information, then we could always continue

our search tomorrow. If we couldn't find anything then either, we'd have no choice but to give up. Still, we'd stay if we had to, even if it meant missing our boat to Granzell.

We headed back to Green Goat, and Fran ate a kebab on Jet's back as we discussed our options. But as we got closer to the city, something happened.

“Teacher!”

I see it. Fire!

Red flames and black smoke were rising from Green Goat.

Step on it, Jet!

“Grr!”

Something had gone horribly wrong.

Aside: Salutia

I DIDN'T KNOW how much time had passed since the princess left.

"It's not working."

I sighed and pulled my hands away from the bonfire. Despite all my concentration, I still couldn't use magic. The princess said that focus and imagination were important, but what if I just wasn't talented enough? Of course, I'm not as talented as the Black Lightning Princess. She was already a powerful hero, even at such a young age.

I was still learning the basics. Fire Magic was the first step to learning Thunder Magic, but I couldn't even manage that much. It was frustrating. It'd tried so hard, but I just ended up tired and weak.

But I mustn't give up. Fran was younger than me, but she was so strong. And Lady Kiara saved our race from constant oppression. I looked up to them. I wanted to be like them one day. That much I knew for sure.

We spent so long thinking we were the weakest race. That we were doomed to never evolve. But things are different now. Evolution was within our grasp. Knowing that, I couldn't slack off.

"Again..."

"Salutia, how about you take a break?"

"Oh, but I'm not tired yet, elder."

"But nothing. Have you looked at your hands recently?"

"My hands? Why...?"

I looked down. My palms were swollen and bright red. I must have burned myself when I was holding them over the fire. They'd gotten used to the heat, but my skin still blistered.

"Now that I see it...ow, ow!"

"Come on, we'll put some ointment on you. You'll feel better."

"S-sorry."

"I know how you feel, but getting hurt doesn't help anyone."

"But I—"

KABOOM!

Before I could tell the elder how I felt, there was an explosion in the distance.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“That I did. We may have a situation on our hands. Gather everyone together, quickly!”

“Yes sir!”

The other beast tribes huddled together, unsure of what was going on. We were the only ones preparing to evacuate. Maybe we wouldn’t need to, but better safe than sorry. If it was just a friendly mage practicing explosive spells right outside the city, then we could all have a good laugh about it in the morning.

KABLAM!

“Something is definitely wrong...!”

That explosion came from *inside* the city. We gathered our people together. Everyone who could fight was ready to do so.

“GUOOOOON!”

“That sound...!”

It was a roar. And it came from something *gigantic*. Why hadn’t the warning bells sounded? The city was clearly under attack...

“Everyone who can’t fight, get inside!” the elder shouted. “The inns will give you shelter!”

He’d already talked them into taking us in. If nothing else, the children had been using their rooms since we arrived. So, we moved our non-combatants inside—the children and elderly all crammed together in a tight space. That left us behind to fight, although we weren’t very good with our weapons.

“Waaaaah!”

The watchman screamed as he saw what was coming.

“G-goblins! Pitch-black goblins...!”

“There are zombies too!”

“Come on, Gran!” I said. “You gotta get inside!”

“I’m doing my best, dear!”

“Lock the door. Stay inside until it’s over, all right?”

“Don’t do anything reckless, Salutia. Remember the princess and Lady Kiara saved you for a reason.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I closed the door and heard the click of the lock.

“Gyagao!”

“Huh?”

A nearby goblin let out a fearsome and hostile scream. When I turned around, the black goblins were closing in on us. They were so fast!

“These aren’t normal goblins!” a Red Dog guard shouted as he engaged one of them in combat.

He used to be a guard for another village, but his encampment was next to ours, and we’d grown friendly. A goblin should’ve been no match for him, but this black kind gave him trouble.

“Gyaaooooo!”

“Damn it!”

The goblin pushed him back. He’s going to get killed at this rate! I had no time to think, I just ran—plunging my brand-new sword into the goblin’s arm. The blade made contact but couldn’t penetrate the creature’s skin. It didn’t make sense. Back when I went goblin hunting with the princess, I’d killed one of these things with a knife! At least I managed to get this one’s attention.

“Good job, little lady! Raaah!”

“Giiii!”

The man broke free and jabbed his index finger into the goblin’s eye as hard as he could. The goblin dropped its sword and grabbed its eye in pain. My body moved forward, slashing at the creature’s neck. The princess taught me this move. It was my favorite.

This time, my steel broke through its skin. Blood gushed out of the goblin as it fell to the ground. It twitched, then stopped moving.

I think I killed it.

I was too surprised to celebrate.

“You did great!” said the guard.

“Th-thanks...”

“You feeling all right?”

“I...this is my first real battle.”

The last time I held a weapon, Kiara had saved us before we could fight.

“Really? You did pretty damn well for your first try!”

We didn’t have much time to say anything else. More black goblins poured in from the end of the road.

“Damn it! These things are strong! Go get your friends, little lady!”

“A-all right!”

The goblins and zombies soon fell upon the Red Dogs. They put up a good fight, but the enemy was just as strong. Black Cats did our best to help.

“Gyushooo!”

“Urgh!”

“Stay calm! Shields up! Stay alive!”

“I-I’ll try...”

“Now! Stab them with your spears!”

“Yaaaah!”

“Take this!”

Just like the princess taught us. Terrified as we were, we fought on. We would defeat these Fiends, even if we didn’t know what we were doing. Somehow, our readiness to face death drove away our fear. Last time, it bought us enough time for Lady Kiara to save us. I hoped it would be enough to drive off the black goblins today.

But they just kept on coming. Soon, they had us surrounded. The Red Dogs and city guards started falling, and it wouldn’t be long until they got to us...

“Incoming, Salutia!”

“There’s no end to them!”

Soon, the inevitable happened.

“Gyooooo!”

“H-heeeelp! Aaaaah!”

“Sean, no!”

One of the goblins knocked Sean’s shield away while another one drove a spear through his chest. We all thought it was fatal.

“Damn it!”

“How dare you!”

“No! Calm down!”

But we didn’t even think about running. We were angry, and we attacked the goblins recklessly. We outnumbered them, but most of us were fighting goblins toe-to-toe.

“Gyugyaaa!”

“It’s so strong...! Argh!”

“Gyooo!”

“Gyaaa!”

My friends were falling, and the enemies kept coming. Ten more goblins closed in around us, adding to the twelve we were already facing. We still outnumbered them, but I didn’t think we could win. The screams of our fallen friends sapped our morale. We couldn’t even work up the strength to let go of our weapons.

The black goblins made a wicked sound, like they were laughing at us. It sent shivers down my spine.

How odd. It made me more angry than afraid. Had fear finally made me snap? Maybe my training just helped me to conquer it. I hoped it was the latter.

The black goblins cackled as they drew closer. Was this the end of the life that Fran and Kiara had saved...?

That thought brought me back to myself.

“No!” I shouted. The goblins were as surprised as I was. “This isn’t the end! We’re not going to die here. We promised the princess we would become strong!”

I had to rouse everyone’s spirits. We might lose, we might even die, but we wouldn’t stop struggling.

“Lady Kiara gave us a second chance,” I said. “Let’s use it or die trying!”

Even if the worst happened, our deaths would not bring shame to the tribe!

“If we have to go down, we’ll go down fighting!”

I don’t know how it happened but, as I spoke, something bubbled in the back of my mind. Words. Fiery words of power.

“O, Fire...”

As I spoke the Fire Magic incantation, a mysterious power overcame me. My mind became clear and strong as the spell completed itself.

“Burn my enemies! Fire Arrow!”

“Gegyaaaa!”

A small firebolt struck the black goblin right in the face. I didn’t realize how close it’d gotten while I was casting. It wasn’t dead, but at least I got its eyes. The goblin fell to its knees and buried its face in its hands. Its howls of pain stunned the other goblins into silence.

This was our chance. I made my move, and I wasn’t alone. My friends picked up their weapons and attacked. They stabbed the howling goblin in the chest, finishing it off. We were still in grave danger, but I had to smile. I was glad that I wasn’t the only one who remembered what Fran and Kiara had taught us.

The black goblins shifted and glared at us. They’d planned to slaughter easily, like prey, but now we were a threat.

“Gigigi...gaaaa!”

One of them came right for me.

“Yaaaah!”

I knew it was faster than me. I was probably going to die, but I had to try and stop it!

“Gyago...?”

“Huh?”

But the pain of death never came. Instead, the goblin burst into a fountain of blood. Its head was no longer attached to its neck.

“Good job, Salutia.”

Our hero had arrived.

“P-princess...”

She was expressionless as always, but she looked at us with such kind eyes. Although they looked nothing alike, I saw the shadow of Lady Kiara in the way she saved us.

“Hm. It’ll be all right now.”

By the time we got to Green Goat, it was already in a state of emergency. We could see the chaos even before we landed. Fiends and undead were inside the city, tearing everything apart. The beastmen fought valiantly, but they were suffering heavy losses. Most of their combatants were out on recon with the adventurers. The guild should be organizing whoever was left, but I wasn’t sure if it was still functioning.

“It’s on fire.”

That black giant...

It stood at the center of the smoke and flames rising from the Adventurer’s Guild—as though it had appeared *inside* the building and broken through its roof. It must’ve teleported in somehow. And the fire broke out when the lamps ignited the wood. Was the guildmaster all right? What about everyone else that was in there? Without orders, the remaining adventurers would only descend into chaos.

“We have to get going!” Fran said.

Yeah.

“Woof!”

For now, we were more worried about the Black Cats. They were defenseless, and we rushed to their encampment, fearing the worst. We got there just in time. Corrupt Goblins were about to finish off Salutia and the others. The Black Cats looked ready to go down fighting, but they were facing almost certain doom.

“Teacher!”

On it!

Fran didn’t need to say another word. We jumped off of Jet’s back, and I teleported us into the fray. Unfortunately, I flubbed it.

Damn it!

I overshot. Mana control was crucial over long distances. Even the smallest change could affect the range, and now we were now fifteen meters away from where we were supposed to be. Below us, a Corrupt Goblin closed in on Salutia, and she wasn't moving. Was she frozen in fear? I was preparing a spell to repel the goblin when the creature's face burst into flames. Someone had cast a Fire spell. But who?

That girl went and learned Fire Magic!

The other Corrupt Goblins were stunned, and the Black Cats took full advantage. The goblins never saw them coming. They thought they were up against kittens, but these cats were tigers in the making!

Fran accelerated with Air Hop and lopped the Corrupt Goblin's head clean off.

"Gyago...?"

"Huh?"

Neither Salutia nor the goblin knew what happened. Both of them stared blankly at Fran, but she kept going—cutting down every Corrupt Goblin in sight. She flicked the blood off me and turned to face her kin.

"Good job, Salutia."

"P-princess..."

Salutia's shoulders slumped in relief. She knew Fran had just saved their lives.

"Hm," said Fran. "It'll be all right now."

Fran eased her worries with a smile and healed everyone in sight. The warm light revived the Black Cats around us.

"Sean... everyone...!"

That Sean kid must've been on the brink of dying, but we brought him back. The other men smiled. Their friends were going to be all right.

"Y-you saved us..."

"I thought we were done for," one of them sobbed.

They were all prepared to die, and their new lease on life brought them to tears.

While we talked to the Black Cats, we asked Jet to keep an eye on our surroundings. The inn behind them was full, but I didn't expect it to

be full of Black Cats. Fran was relieved to see the village elder poke his head out the window. Everyone had managed to evacuate safely.

“Jet, protect them,” said Fran. “I’m going ahead.”

“Woof!”

As much as she wanted to stay, that it wouldn’t put an end to this chaos. And, if she wanted them to be safe, we needed to put an end to it.

“Go get ‘em, princess!”

“Thank you so much!”

“Do be careful!” Salutia said.

Fran smiled, but didn’t look back. She was impressed with Salutia, a young girl desperately fighting for her tribe.

Let’s end this, I said.

“Hm!”

With the will of the Black Cats behind us, we made a beeline for the Adventurer’s Guild. There were a *lot* of Corrupt Goblins between us and our destination. We flew through the air, cutting them down with swords and spells, but there was always more of them.

Where are they coming from?

“The closer we get to the guild the more of them there are.”

True... Maybe the giant has something to do with it...

Fran reached the guild in under five minutes. The building was destroyed, and the black giant was nowhere in sight. It was headed to the count’s estate, knocking down everything in its path.

Kablam!

Red sparks exploded all over the Giant’s body. It was a Flame spell, and one powerful enough to roast a wyvern, but it wasn’t enough. The giant was protected by a powerful black barrier.

“Teacher, that’s Mea!”

Quina’s with her too!

They had returned to Green Goat around the same time we did. Mea was on Lind’s back, firing down Flame spells. She circled the giant, raining down blasts of fire and trying to find a chink in its armor. But

that giant's barrier was strong. I didn't think she'd have much luck with those random attacks.

"I've seen that thing before," Fran said.

So, you do remember.

"Hm."

The giant looked exactly like the creature Linford transformed into, back in Bulbola. What was this thing doing here?

"I'm going to help Mea."

Hang on! There are people still alive inside the guild! We have to help them!

"Hm!"

We rushed inside what was left of the guildhouse, and the signs of life became more apparent.

Under that pile of rubble. I'll move it; you extract whoever's underneath.

"Got it."

I moved the rubble carefully out of the way, revealing several unconscious people. They were protected by a magical barrier, saving them from certain death. The guildmaster was among the survivors, and he was in the worst condition—suffering burns and fractures all over his body. We healed him up quickly, but there was no time to let the old man rest.

"Wake up, guildmaster."

"Bwuh...? Where am I...?"

We needed to know what had happened. The safety of the Black Cats was at stake.

"They caught us off guard," he explained.

"How?"

"You remember the Corrupt Goblins we killed earlier? There was some kind of trap inside their crystals..."

The adventurers had brought the crystals back to the guild, but the enemy had planned for just such an eventuality.

"What do you mean?"

“The crystals were used to teleport in reinforcements.”

It reminded me of Murelia and Theraclede’s teleportation abilities. It was part of Fiendmancy and used to penetrate city walls.

“They read our every move...”

The enemy knew the guild would send adventurers out looking for whoever was pulling the strings. With them gone, the city was left virtually defenseless.

“They waited until we were wide open.”

A few hours after the adventurers left, the crystals cracked, creating a massive summoning circle. Before anyone could act, the black giant appeared. The guildmaster and the others were caught in the initial blast.

Kaboom!

Another explosion. Was that the black giant? We had no time to waste.

“You must defeat it, Black Lightning Princess.”

“What about the rest of them?”

“The black giant comes first,” said the guildmaster. “It’s the one producing all the corrupt goblins and zombies. When it’s gone, we’ll deal with the rest. Our citizens can fight.”

Most beastmen could hold their own. All they needed was someone to give them orders. Guess I’d spent so long with the Black Cats that I’d forgotten that.

We left the guildmaster and headed after the black giant. It didn’t take long to spot it, all we had to do was follow the trail of destruction. Fortunately, the civilians had evacuated, minimizing the loss of life. As we approached, the sunset burned bright red behind the creature—highlighting both its menacing silhouette and the reality of what we were facing.

The count’s estate is protected by a barrier. That must be its target.

“We should rendezvous with Mea and kill it before it gets there.”

Good idea. But don’t use any area of effect attacks, we’re still in town.

“We’ll have to cut it down.”

Seems like it. If it’s anything like Linford, it’ll regenerate like crazy.

Are you up for it?

“Hm. Any time.”

Fran Air Hopped through the city, completely focused on the black giant. Mea soon noticed us and guided Lind closer.

“Excellent timing, Fran! Help me out with this thing!”

“Of course.”

“Get on!”

“Hm!”

Chapter 6: Signs of Strength

EVEN MOUNTED on Lind's back, the black giant continued to ignore us. It didn't even consider us a threat. We had to figure out a way to defeat it.

"You said it is like the fiendified Linford Laurentia?" Mea asked.

"Right down to the black barrier."

"How strong is it?"

"Very."

"A-all right."

I elaborated on Linford's powers. The giant wasn't *exactly* the same, but any information would help at this point. Mea explained that they'd managed to break through its barrier and damage it once. It regenerated soon after, but it at least meant that the Fiend wasn't invincible.

"I saw its core," Mea said. "I think it's made of the thing the Valkyrie used. Fiendstone. Remember?"

"Of course."

How could we forget?

As soon as the Valkyrie used it, she'd mutated into a living pile of Malice.

"The giant's Fiendstone is buried deep inside it," Mea said. "I sensed it."

That must be the source of its energy.

Fiendstone is resilient. It'll take a lot of force to destroy it.

"And it's shielded under three layers of protection," said Mea. "The black barrier, the giant's flesh, and an inner barrier around the Fiendstone itself."

That sounds rough... Can you penetrate its defenses again?

"I can do one more. Anything beyond that is doubtful."

“My lady’s White Fire takes a lot out of her,” Quina explained.

I see.

Mea’s white flames were powerful enough to damage Murelia, but it came at great cost.

“Still,” she said. “I will deal with the barrier. It will regenerate in under a minute, so you need to work fast to destroy the Fiendstone. Can you do it?”

“Hrm...”

That’s a tall order...

Even if Mea managed to break through, we still had to puncture its skin and break the barrier protecting its core.

I can get through its flesh with Kanna Kamuy. From there, we could use Sword God Form and...

No, Sword God Form would only last a few seconds. If we didn’t kill the giant instantly, we’d be all out of options. I wouldn’t have enough durability left to try anything else.

“We have to find another way.”

“Agreed. I’d rather not form a strategy around such a capricious skill.”

But then, what should we do about the Fiendstone?

“I have a plan,” said Fran.

She explained the part we would play in it. It was a pretty good idea.

“We’ll run with that, then!” Mea said.

“Hm!”

We split up and headed to our positions. As Fran and I took to the skies, Quina made the opening move.

“Will you play with me a while, giant?”

“Gugoooo!”

“My, aren’t we impatient? You won’t catch me while you’re flailing about like that.”

“Guaaaa!”

“That’s it! Go on the offensive!”

Quina wasn't just a distraction. She would draw out the giant's most powerful attacks to give Fran and Mea a clear run. Quina provoked the creature with her acrobatics and Illusion Magic, and it wasn't long before it launched a barrage of spells. As powerful as the giant was, it ran out of spells soon enough.

It was almost time for us to launch into action. Far up in the sky, Mea charged her right hand with white-gold flames. It was the same attack she'd used against Murelia. Could Lind cope with that inferno forming on his back? He didn't seem fazed. Instead, he rushed headlong toward the giant.

"Guaaaa!"

Quina perfectly dodged another of the giant's attacks. It glared at her, all of its rage fixed on the small insect buzzing about its feet. It was then that Mea made her move.

"Excellent, Quina! I won't waste this opportunity!"

"Kuooooo!"

On Mea's command, Lind burst into flames. It almost looked like they had self-destructed. Fran and I watched as a fireball hurtled toward the black giant. Lind added his flames to Mea's, increasing their power. When it was at its peak, Mea unleashed her trump card.

"Golden Flame of Annihilation!"

The flames formed a sword in Mea's right hand. This was the firebrand that'd incinerated the Valkyrie.

"Taaaah!"

"Kuooooo!"

At the sound of Mea's battle cry, Lind accelerated even further. The princess swung her white-gold sword like a batter at full swing, and Lind's speed only amplified its force. The bright fireball tore right through the giant's barrier. Without slowing, Lind pivoted and attacked again. Mea swiped her firebrand across its side, and the Golden Flame of Annihilation lit up the giant's body.

"Aaaaarg...!"

The giant screamed in pain. It reached up to the sky, like a sinner begging for mercy.

That was amazing.

“Hm.”

Fran and I charged up our own energy. It wouldn't be long before we had to follow up on Mea's white-gold fire.

“Are you okay, Teacher...?”

I'm fine. We'll make this work...

“Yeah. I know you'll be fine.”

My role was to attack with Kanna Kamuy and expose the giant's Fiendstone, but I still hadn't completely mastered my magical abilities. Could I really pull off such a powerful spell? I couldn't just throw it out there—I had to keep the area of effect small to make sure it penetrated the giant's flesh. Even before my remodeling, I'd never tried it.

That made me anxious. What if I failed? In the end, Fran knew me better than I knew myself.

Sorry. I'm just a little worried.

“We can do it, Teacher. Even if you miss, I can still destroy its Fiendstone.”

Fran...

And to think that I was meant to be her guardian. I didn't know if I could do it, but that only meant I had to find a way! I'd lose my teaching license if I failed. As pathetic a father figure as I was, I had to step up to the plate and score a homerun!

“Giiiiiaaaaaa!”

The air shook with the giant's scream. It flailed around with its right arm and launched a volley of spells at Mea. The magic assaulted her like a swarm of locusts.

“Gah!”

“Kuooo!”

The attack was too dense, and Lind couldn't evade it. His body was riddled with spells. He and Mea went down together.

“No!”

She'll be all right, Fran! It will take more than that to hurt her!

“Hm.”

It's our turn now.

“Let’s beat this thing.”

Damn right.

Quina had anticipated the princess’ fall. She would take care of her. The best we could do was land our attack. Fran set her gaze on the giant, waiting for the flames to go out. The creature was badly burned, and a poisonous-looking smoke rose from its body.

Let’s go, Fran!

“Hm!”

If we wanted to break that Fiendstone, then our attack needed to be at least as powerful as Mea’s. The situation was a lot like Bulbola. We’d torn through Linford’s body with an aerial attack, but only defeated him because he was already injured. If it wasn’t for Amanda and the others, we would have lost. It was a tough pill to swallow, but we had done some growing up since then.

Fran began her freefall and drew me from my scabbard.

“Awaken. Flashing Thunderclap.”

Fran’s trump card. This was power that she didn’t have in Bulbola. Power she risked her life to obtain.

“Come on, Teacher.”

Yeah.

She spoke like she was asking me to go for a walk, and that was fine. She didn’t have to stress if she didn’t want to. Fran fell with the pull of gravity, completely relaxed. Even though we were in freefall, she closed her eyes and controlled her breathing.

But inside, she was bubbling with power, and she focused all of it into a single attack. She breathed deep into her belly, and I felt her black lightning flow into me. Turning me into an extension of her arm. It was a good feeling—as though we were closer than ever before.

Raaaaah! Kanna Kamuy!

At my command, a magic circle appeared in the sky. But it wasn’t exactly what I wanted.

Hrrrrrrgh!

I focused, trying to concentrate the lightning on a single point. I pictured a white dragon made of electricity, coiling up to strike its prey.

At the same time, I pictured Murelia's Kanna Kamuy. As much as I didn't want to use her as reference, she'd executed it perfectly.

Raaaaaaah!

I can do this! Control the mana! Don't let Fran down!

Aaaaaah!

A spear of lightning fell from the sky and shot right through the giant.

“Gyagoaaaaa!”

It worked. The lightning destroyed the giant's left shoulder and sent its arm flying. Better still, a pitch-black crystal peeked through the gaping wound.

Over to you, Fran.

“Hm!”

Fran opened her eyes and readied me. She hopped through the air, accelerating toward the giant below. She'd finished Linford in the same way with Pressurized Quickdraw, only this time she was a black lightning bolt. We applied all kinds of buffs on ourselves. Weight Manipulation, Elemental Blade, Enhanced Physique, anything that might help. That was when we started to glow blue.

But we were stronger now, with more skills at our disposal and Fiend Crusher Revelation to boot. That made the blue light different too. It was always an aqua color before, but now it was deeper, closer to ultramarine. It felt like we could crush anything in our path. And of course, now had an even stronger finishing move at our disposal.

“Sword King Arts...”

“Gogaaa?”

As Fran began her incantation, the black giant finally noticed her and looked up. We were close enough to see its barrier was identical to Linford's. Back then, we couldn't get through it. Not with all our might. And in fact, the giant's barrier was so concentrated that it might be even stronger. But neither of us were worried. Despite the creature's overwhelming malice, neither of us despaired. How could we?

“Skycutter.”

How could we be afraid when we had grown so powerful?

“Oooooorgh!”

My blue blade split the Fiendstone clean in half. This was the attack that put an end to the nightmare in Bulbola.

We teleported away before we hit the ground, while the giant stumbled awkwardly, like a man learning the robot. Mea was right: that Fiendstone was its weak point. But as the giant was faced with death, it roared.

“Eeeeeergh!”

There was something different about that scream. It sounded like it was trying to talk. But it didn’t have Intimidate or Roar, so what was it doing?

There’s a magic circle at its feet...!

It was almost as large as the one I cast for Kanna Kamuy. Pitch black mana drafted upward and roared into a torrent. A geyser of mana covered the creature’s body.

Why won’t you die?!

“Haaa!”

We tried firing off some spells, but the black mana deflected them.

“Roooooogh!”

The giant lurched out of the black cloud. We couldn’t believe our eyes.

What...?! He’s completely healed?! But we destroyed his Fiendstone!

There was barely a singe or a cut on it. Did it just heal itself? Maybe the Fiendstone *wasn’t* its weak point after all.

Fran sniffed the air and winced. “Something smells.”

What?

I Identified the giant out of habit and found that it had changed. *Before, the only thing I could tell was that it was a Vilefiend.*

Name: Corrupt Lesser Zombie Giant

Race: Undead

Level: 1/99

HP: 4877; Magic: 301; Strength: 1878; Agility: 107

Titles: *Blessed of the Evil One; Revived*

So, it was undead now? It only emitted around half as much Malice as it had, but it was teeming with necromantic energy. I still couldn't see its skills, but I *could* see its stats and titles now. Enough to tell that it was weaker than Linford. Even its health was no match for the old Fiendmancer.

I think it turned itself into a zombie just as it died.

"It made itself undead?"

Seems like it.

Fortunately for us, it was only a *Lesser Zombie Giant*, significantly weaker than before. Something must've gone wrong with its transformation. But it was still pretty tough. I didn't want to imagine what we'd be up against if its spell had worked perfectly. Even as it was, it had a boatload of life and strength, and was easily a B-Threat.

We had to kill it, but Fran was nearing her limit. I could heal her, but there was no healing the mental exhaustion. We just needed one more attack.

Fran, I'm going to cast another Kanna Kamuy. Get ready with your black lightning.

"Got it!"

When we'd faced the A-Rank adventurer Phelms in the fighting tournament, we'd combined our attacks together. We were going to do the same thing now. A Black Thunderfall-amplified Kanna Kamuy was the most powerful attack in our arsenal, but it came at a cost. Using it would kick Fran out of her Awakened form, and she wouldn't be able to use Flashing Thunderclap for a while. If it didn't land, we were done for.

To make a fully charged attack, we needed to get close. Fran readied me and rushed headlong toward the undead giant. It turned to face us, probably sensing our presence with Life Sense.

"Bloooooorh!"

"Urgh."

Poison mist, but it's not too powerful. Punch through!

“Got it.”

The giant burped poisonous gas, but Abnormal Status Resistance and Manipulate Poison gave us a free ticket.

“Gorgh?”

The giant sounded confused. The poison mist only succeeded in concealing us. The creature brought its arm down to attack us, but Fran jumped on top of it easily. She was going straight for its head.

Here we go!

“Hm! Black Thunderfall!”

Kanna Kamuy...!

Black lightning mingled with my spell and crashed into the undead giant. The air sizzled. Kanna Kamuy came out a *lot* smoother than I’d expected. I was stunned. White and black lightning fused together and formed a pillar, piercing the giant.

“Ruuiiiiiiaaaaaa!”

The creature’s roar was as loud as the thunderclap. The lightning cracked its skull open, and electricity lit up its entire body. It did almost as much damage as Skycutter...

And yet it failed to clinch victory.

“It’s still moving!”

How is that possible?!

The creature’s Magic Resistance was too high. Its insides were pulsating with Malice and mana.

“Wargh...”

“Its head is growing back...”

This was bad. This was very bad. Fran and I were pretty much out of mana.

Mea... No, she’s still out cold.

She wasn’t dead, but she was badly injured and exhausted from her ultimate attack.

I thought of letting the city guards and adventurers finish the creature off, but things wouldn’t work out that easily. Now that I got a closer look at it, the giant was up to something. Something terrible.

“Ruaaaaaaa!”

“Teacher, look!”

It’s making more undead!

The giant raised undead civilians from the rubble of their houses. These lesser zombies weren’t very strong, but there were so many of them. How could this thing still use necromancy when it was undead itself? All the bodies within three hundred meters of the giant rose as zombies. If we didn’t do something soon, the city would be overrun.

“We have to kill it...”

But how...?

“Teacher.”

I knew what she was about to say. There was only one way to defeat it. I’d realized it a few seconds before, but I didn’t want to admit it. It was too dangerous. Even Fran was against it unless there was no other choice.

“We have to use Sword God Form,” she said.

It was our most powerful skill, as well as our most dangerous. Even if we were backed up against a wall, I couldn’t agree to it. There was just too much about it that we didn’t know.

It’s too risky... We haven’t mastered it yet.

“We have to kill it.”

But even when we were in good condition, we could barely control it.

Now we were exhausted. Who knew what would happen?

“But it’s the only way,” Fran said, looking at me with determination.

There was no talking her out of anything when she looked like that.

“Please, Teacher. I want to save everyone...”

Ugh...fine. But we’ll only use it for a second, got it?

Fran smiled. “Okay!”

She was right. If she was the sole survivor of this onslaught, she wouldn’t be pleased. She would move mountains for her tribesmen, but even so...

“Teacher?”

It's nothing. Come on, we have a giant to kill!

“Hm!”

We controlled Sword God Form together, and that meant I could protect Fran by taking the brunt of it. Fran readied me and set her feet. She was like an arrow ready to launch. She closed her eyes. It was time to make our move.

“Come on!”

Fran accelerated toward the giant. It tried to swat her away, but it was too late. She had activated her skill.

“Sword God Form!” she yelled, her voice twisted with pain.

Uaaaaaargh!

The spirit of the Sword God was upon us. Power flowed through me, and Fran's aura changed completely. The giant noticed the sudden shift. It felt the fear of death in the air. The creature prepared to release another blast of poison gas by opening its mouth but, by the time Fran was done, it couldn't close it again. In a flash, she lopped its head clean off.

I was worried it would grow back again, but the undead giant crumpled to its knees. Its Malice and mana dissipated as it died, and it was all thanks to Sword God Form. Just imbuing a weapon wasn't enough. The divine element had penetrated the giant's body, neutralizing its skills and destroying its mana. The perfect manipulation of the divine element and knowledge of its weak point came together to create the fatal blow...but we didn't have time to analyze the effects.

Fran, turn it off!

“Ah...”

Her whole body ruptured as she was pushed beyond her limit. Blood spurted from her mouth. She'd managed to turn it off, but she was already gravely injured, and the divine element meant that she couldn't be healed effectively. The only thing I could do was lower her gently on the ground.

“Teacher...”

Don't talk! I'm going to heal you now!

Fran barely had enough strength to hold me, but she smiled. And

not just because she'd managed to kill the giant.

Fran! Why did you have to do that...?!

I'm glad you're okay, she said.

If you die here, none of this will be worth it!

I'm sorry...

No... I'm sorry too.

Fran knew that I would take more than my fair share of the burden. So *she* took the brunt of it so I wouldn't be destroyed. Since she was the one who actually possessed the skill, her will overrode mine. That's why her body had burst open, while mine only suffered a crack.

Damn it! It isn't working...!

Greater Heal could barely repair a fifth of her wounds. I threw potions on her, but still got nothing. The ground beneath us was drenched with potions and her blood.

I was running out of mana. I had to make it count. I concentrated on my Healing spells and tried to amplify them, as I'd done with Kanna Kamuy. I visualized healing Fran from the inside, not just her flesh and bones, but her entire existence.

No. This was no longer visualization. This was prayer. Now I understood why priests were healers in RPGs.

I prayed with all my being. *Please heal Fran. Please make her better. God, please! Greater Heal!*

The spell felt different this time. The mana looked different as it flowed through Fran too. Heal had always worked like a potion applied on an injury. Now, it was like I injected it directly to her veins. She wasn't completely healed, but that one spell had done more than all the others.

No, this isn't enough... Wait, I know!

I flew to the giant's corpse, activated Mana Thief, and jabbed myself into it. I was running out of mana, so I might as well get what little I could from the environment. There was Malice mixed in with it, but not very much.

That'll do it!

I spent the next ten minutes flitting back and forth between Fran

and the giant's remains. It felt like going back to a well to put out a fire. After that, Fran looked completely healed. She was still unconscious with blood loss, but the worst of it was over.

Oh, thank goodness...

"Zzzz."

I sighed with relief. Fran was sleeping peacefully.

What am I gonna do with you...

"Zzz."

"Teacher! Is Fran all right?"

Mea. Good to see you're okay.

"And Fran?"

She'll be fine. She's just tired.

"Excellent...!" Mea said.

She sounded relieved too. The princess smiled the same way that Fran had earlier—rejoicing in the good fortune of others.

"My lady," said Quina. "May I suggest we move to a safer location? It's still dangerous out here."

"Ah, of course! There are still Fiends around!"

"We can take you to Count Marmano or to the Black Cat tribe. Which would you prefer?"

Black Cats, please. Jet's still with them, but I'm worried whether they can handle another goblin attack.

"Very well," said Quina. "Let's hop to it."

"Indeed!" Mea agreed. "I shall carry Fran!"

She pulled Fran on her shoulders and sprinted, despite her exhaustion. It made for a bumpy ride, but Fran didn't look like she was getting up any time soon.

"P-Princess!" Salutia called out. "What happened?!"

Jet whined with worry, looking as troubled as the young Black Cat. Fortunately, everyone in the encampment was accounted for.

"She is exhausted after a hard day's battle," Mea explained. "Nothing to worry about. May I ask you to look after her?"

“Of course! Miss...?”

“Mea. And this is Quina. We are Fran’s friends.”

Revealing her true identity would only have made things more awkward. And besides, the fact that she was Fran’s friend was more important to her.

“I see! Thank you for helping the princess!”

“Thank you for looking after her. We must be going now.”

Mea and Quina left Fran in Salutia’s care and departed the encampment. When they’d gone, Salutia carried her to the inn, and the women laid her in bed.

Never seen you that worried, Jet.

Arf?

She’s asleep. She’ll wake up soon. You better take care of us though, because I’m about as tired as she is.

Woof!

I genuinely thought Fran would wake up in a few hours, but she ended up sleeping until the next morning. The other Black Cats were so anxious that they treated her awakening like the resurrection of the dead. The first thing she said was “I’m hungry,” which was very much like her. After that, the beastmen threw a breakfast carnivore carnival, and Fran ate ten kilograms of meat. They really did have iron stomachs.

Still, Fran hadn’t fully recovered yet. I think she was only at about 20 percent of her full power. Even so, she had enough strength to use Pocket Dimension, Healing Magic, and to help clean up Green Goat.

That night, she and the others prepared to leave. As much as we would love to stay a few more days, we had other plans.

“So, you’re really leaving?”

“Hm. I have to be at the ceremony, and I have a boat to catch to Granzell.”

“I see...”

The Black Cats were all sad to see her go, especially Salutia, but Fran had made up her mind. If we missed that high-speed ship, we wouldn’t make it to Granzell in time. And Fran wanted to keep her promise to Garrus.

“I’ll be back.”

“We’ll be waiting for you!” said Salutia. “But...”

“But?”

“I might get strong enough to look for you first.”

Fran raised her eyebrows. She hadn’t thought of that possibility.

“I see.”

Salutia chuckled. “I hope I’ll see you out there.”

“Hm. Me too.”

Fran smiled the biggest smile I had ever seen. Given how expressionless she usually was, she might as well be laughing. She was fond of her tribesmen, but she had always thought of them as helpless. Salutia’s words reassured her that they could take care of themselves.

Fran was in a good mood as we rode to the capital on Lind’s back. She chuckled as she talked to Mea, and even *hummed*. I could count on one hand the number of times that had happened.

We arrived at Bestia in the middle of the night. The city walls were closed, but Princess Nemea had her own private door into the palace. Fran had a (rather hefty) light dinner and a bath, and she retired to her quarters.

You’ll have to go to sleep early tonight. We have an award ceremony in the morning, then straight onto Grayseal after that.

“Hm.”

We were on a tight schedule, and I would carry her with Telekinesis if I had to. But, as it turned out, Fran wouldn’t be getting sleep for a little while yet.

“Fran! I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Mea? What are you doing here?”

Mea was in Fran’s room, wearing oversized white silk pajamas and a nightcap. It looked great on her.

“You know what I’m doing here!”

“Hm?”

“Well...you know...”

Mea was tongue-tied, but I knew what she was trying to say.

“My lady, you must actually *tell* Fran that you wish to have a sleepover, since tonight is her last night.”

“I-I was getting there!”

I knew it. And Quina’s timing was perfect as ever.

“There it is,” said Mea. “I’m sleeping here tonight!”

“Hm. Okay. Can Jet stay too?”

“Jet?”

“Arf?”

Upon hearing his name, Jet popped his head out of the shadows. We hadn’t invited him to eat with us in the palace dining room, so he was a bit sulky. I mean, he would’ve made quite a mess.

“He fought really hard,” said Fran.

“I see. Very well! Jet has proven his mettle in battle!”

Jet barked happily, his mood improving immediately. And so, Fran spent her final night in the Beastman Nation talking to Mea about girly things. Monsters they’d fought, near death experiences...you know the sort of thing.

It was the morning of the award ceremony.

In the end, it wasn’t as flashy as I’d thought. The ceremony was held in a room at the palace, where Fran’s accomplishments would be read by some government officials. After that, a member of the royal family would award her with the medal. The whole thing would take about thirty minutes, and the public announcement would be made later, during the victory parade.

The medals were already prepared, and the ceremony would end as soon as everyone received them. The beastmen weren’t ones for formalities, so their award ceremonies were short. None of the participants looked surprised at the lack of pomp and circumstance.

Varavarham, the Purple Wind Elephant, was the first general to go up. They’d all drunk enough alcohol over the last few days to sanitize a hospital multiple times over, but none of them seemed to have a migraine and they all walked straight as an arrow. Prime Minister Raymond and Guiza, the Minister of Finance, were officiating—attended by their subordinates. Lucius was present too, although he was

the court mage, so maybe he was officiating too. Finally, Princess Nemea awarded the medals.

“You have done well, Black Cat Fran.”

“Hm.”

“You have repelled the northern invasion and saved Green Goat from certain doom.”

“Hm.”

“Please accept the Golden Beast Fang in recognition of your accomplishments.”

The ceremony was as solemn as it was short, and it ended almost as quickly as it began. But there were two surprises. First, Jet got a medal of his own. It was awarded to outstanding familiars who were of great service to their tamers. Mea made sure it was ready on time.

“You have done well too, Jet.”

“Woof!”

“Hm. It looks good on you,” said Fran.

Jet barked happily as Mea hung the medal on his collar. I should make him some extra spicy curry as a reward. I always made it on the mild side to accommodate Fran’s tastes, but if there was ever an occasion to reward the direwolf with hellfire curry, it was now.

The other surprise was our reward money. Apparently, it came with a pledge to support the Black Cat tribe. The government had considered the tribe’s actions in Green Goat and promised to support them in the future. They would also provide any Black Cat who wanted to fight with equipment and training. Fran even got to keep her ten million gold. They must have been very inspired by her.

Once the ceremony was over, it was time for us to depart. We’d done all our shopping and received all our prizes, now it was time to catch the Beast King’s speedboat in Grayseal and head back to Granzell. Normally, the trip to the harbor would take ten days. Even a horned cart cutting through the Haunt on the way would take half a day. But we would be taking a rather more direct route.

We should get going.

“Hm.”

Fran visited the room where Kiara’s body was resting. There were

no tears or words, she just spent a few minutes in silent vigil. She looked determined when she left. Clearly, Fran had inherited something from Kiara, although I knew not what.

Are you sure you're okay? I asked.

"Hm. I'm fine now."

All right.

"Come on, Teacher."

Yeah!

Mea was waiting for us outside.

"Come then!"

"Hm."

Mea had watched her bid Kiara farewell. She smiled wordlessly, then led us to an empty pasture outside the city walls.

"Are you ready, Fran?"

"Hm."

"Good. Come, Lind!"

"Kuooooo!"

Lind would be taking us to Grayseal, and Fran and Mea were his only passengers. Quina was staying behind at the palace. The dragon looked happy for it and could probably go faster too.

"Kuoooooooo!"

So fast!

"Wow!"

Lind spread his wings and accelerated. Fran was used to air travel, but even she was surprised. I was used to going faster, but riding on Fran's back made for a different experience.

"Ha ha ha! This isn't even the fastest he can go! Lind, show them what you're made of!"

"Kuoooo!"

Lind sped up again, his body glowing bright red, leaving a blazing trail of fire across the sky. It looked similar to the flame spell Vernier, only Lind could use it to *maintain* his speed instead of just short bursts. This was his Unique Skill, Essence of Pyromancy. I paid close attention.

Perhaps I could apply it to my own skills in the future. Despite the speed, we didn't really feel the air. The wind was only about as strong as a standing fan—negligible at this altitude.

“Look over there! Monarch tortoises!”

“Oooh.”

Mea pointed to a lake where a pack of tortoises with trees on their backs swarmed together, forming a small hill. I had never seen anything like it.

“And down there is the famous Jade Lake!”

It's so pretty.

The lake shimmered green, and the green rocks at the bottom reflected the sunlight. Mea showed us one rare sight after another. She was like a tour guide on the Airbus Lind.

“Oh! The mist has cleared over the border mountains!”

“Wow.”

It's so high up.

Mea turned toward the gigantic gray mountain range. Even from afar, it looked divine—like a veil connecting the earth and the sky. I'd never seen a sight like it. That thing was even taller than Mt. Everest.

And we were only at the foot of the mountain...

“Hm.”

As Fran looked at the mountains, a string of events played in her mind—good, bad, and everything in between.

“Fran?” said Mea.

“Hm?”

“You'll come back, won't you?” she asked, finally revealing her reason for playing the tour guide. A lot of things had happened since Fran came to the Beastman Nation, most of them painful. Mea wanted to give her something nice to remember this place by.

“Of course,” said Fran.

“R-really?”

“Hm. You'll be here.”

Fran was a lot more optimistic than she let on. All she needed was

one good thing to outweigh the bad. She might have lost Kiara and almost gotten herself killed, but she would certainly come back to visit her best friend Mea.

“I’ll come again,” she said. “Promise.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I thought that Mea trembled as she spoke, but perhaps it was just my imagination.

Epilogue

BY THE TIME we arrived, a large ship was already docked in Grayseal. It looked quite official.

Looks like the Beast King's back in town.

"Hm."

We could feel his overwhelming presence the moment we set down. Eventually, we found Rigdith chatting with his subordinates at the harbor. When he noticed us, he headed over.

"Hey there, Fran! Hey, Dumbass Daughter!"

"It's been a while, Fool Father."

"Ga ha ha! You get stronger every time I see you, my girl!"

"I get stronger just by sleeping at night."

Mea and Rigdith exchanged jabs with each other. They lacked the reservations of a conventional parent-child relationship, but they were very friendly.

The Beast King turned his attention to Fran. He inspected her, then drew his spear in a flash and brought it down on Fran's head. She dodged it by a hair's breadth. The force of the spear flapped through the fabric of her armor. Fran brandished me and stabbed at the Beast King, but Rigdith pulled back—blocking the life-threatening attack with the shaft of his spear.

Metal rang on metal as I struck the spear several inches from his neck. They'd both struck to kill, although they limited themselves to using only Sword King Mastery and Spear King Mastery respectively. If Mea had been on the receiving end of this exchange, she probably would have been injured or knocked off balance.

Fran and Rigdith exchanged blows for a while, grazing each other's guard until finally, without speaking, they put their weapons away.

"Good dodge," said the Beast King.

"You too."

We weren't offended or confused. Fran and Rigdith were just assessing each other, and it was only possible because they both had King-Class Mastery Skills. My conclusion? They were on an equal footing.

"Wh-what are you two doing?!"

Mea, on the other hand, was shocked. As powerful as she was, she didn't realize that they weren't going to harm each other. She wasn't at their level quite yet.

"Ha ha ha! Oh, we're just saying hello! Isn't that right, Fran?"

"Hm."

"Hello...? You could've hurt each other! Or worse!"

"Well, we didn't. Besides, we would've stopped if things got too dangerous!"

"Hm?"

"Oh," said the Beast King. "You wouldn't have?"

"You would've been okay," said Fran. "You have Spear King Mastery."

"Can't argue with you there..."

If Fran couldn't avoid his initial blow, Rigdith would've stopped. Although "stop" could still be interpreted as "stopped short of a killing blow." Either way, he sensed Fran wasn't at 100 percent and definitely held back.

"So, you have Sword King Mastery now," he said. "And you're a Sword King too."

"How do you know that?"

Rigdith smirked. "You're good at hiding your presence, little lady. But you suck at holding back."

"What do you mean?"

"Here's the thing: you can sense someone's presence and tell how powerful they are."

"Hm."

"But, when we met earlier, you looked completely defenseless. I know that you trust me, but I also know that you don't trust me *completely*. We've clashed swords before, and you know how strong I

am. So why would you appear defenseless to someone like that? You had to have something up your sleeve, just in case. And Sword King Mastery is the only thing that could defend against my spear. Our little greeting pretty much confirmed it.”

That...was a very good point.

“Of course,” he said. “You need to be at the same level as someone to tell any of that, but it’s useful to know in a close match.”

“Hm. Got it.”

“So, this is how King Classes talk to each other...” Mea said, a little shaken.

She couldn’t understand what they were talking about.

“So,” Fran said, “how do you look weaker?”

“Easy. Be more cautious of your surroundings. That’s usually enough.”

The stronger you are, the less nervous you were in a fight. Conversely, if you were weak, you had to be extremely careful. It made sense.

“That way,” said Rigdith. “You can beat anyone that underestimates you, and hold your own against anyone who’s actually strong.”

“Hm.”

“I could give a whole lecture about it, but that’ll do for now. You’ll fool chumps, but not me! But you’ll go easy on me, won’t you?”

No, we wouldn’t. Still, the Beast King taught us the importance of concealing our true strength. That was valuable advice.

“Thanks,” said Fran.

“I gotta pay you back somehow.”

“Pay me back?”

“You really don’t get it, do you? In case you forgot, I’m the king of the country you just saved. I should be on my knees kissing your feet.”

“Father, even *I* think that’s overdoing it...”

“I know.”

As much as the Beast King’s people loved him, kissing a hero’s feet

was a step too far.

“But I’m allowed this much, at least,” he said.

“?”

The Beast King took Fran’s hand and bowed deeply. Folding his large frame into such a defenseless position was the greatest expression of respect he could give.

“Thank you,” Rigdith said solemnly. “For everything.”

He kept bowing for a good minute, but no one was about to tell him to stop. Mea and his subordinates only watched quietly. It almost looked like some kind of ceremony.

“Sorry,” he said, raising his head. “That ended up taking a while.”

“No problem.”

And just like that, he was back to his regular self. He clapped Fran on her shoulder with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, and you should take this with you.”

“?”

He handed her a small, dirty pouch. It didn’t look very magical. In fact, it didn’t look magical at all.

“An item pouch?” Fran asked.

“Yeah. I heard they only gave you a measly ten million gold.”

Again, ten million gold was *not* a measly amount.

“You saved an entire country and that’s all you get?” said Rigdith. “Personally, I think you should get ten billion, at least. But a king can’t go blowing his nation’s coffers however he pleases.”

He might be a little rough around the edges, but he was no wayward tyrant.

“We don’t have many ministers as it is,” he said with a wry grin. “Can’t annoy them too much.”

The beastmen’s natural temperament meant that they’d never want for fighters here. The herbivores fought as ferociously as carnivores. On the flip side, administration and accounting were always understaffed, so those positions would always be valued highly. Some of these ministers looked down on the muscle-brained generals, but they were the exception.

“Considering how much beastmen eat,” said Rigdith. “Logistics is very important. All the more reason to keep our officials happy.”

“I see.”

The government ministers had them by their stomachs.

“But I digress. What I mean is: the state can’t give you any more than it already has, so consider this a tip from me.”

“What is it?”

“Not much. Just five million gold. It’s what I have left over from the trip.”

“Hm.”

You know what, I wasn’t even surprised anymore. Five million? When you added in the award money, and our profits from selling all the monster materials, we were leaving the Beastman Nation with an extra twenty million gold...! Ah, but Fran was unfazed! It made me feel ashamed of how much I freaked out.

As all this was happening, Royce, Gaudartha, and someone who looked like a ship’s captain approached us. The boat was ready to leave.

“Fran, we must ask that you make preparations to board the ship.”

“All right.”

“Do you have any luggage?”

“No. I’m all good.”

“Right. I forgot you have Timespace Magic.”

This was it. Once we got on the ship, we were on our way back to Jillbird.

“I hope your next visit here will be one of leisure, little lady!” the Beast King said.

“Hm.”

“Thank you for all that you’ve done,” said Royce.

“You saved our country,” added Gaudartha.

They bowed their heads, and the Beast King raised his hand in gratitude.

“And thank you,” he said. “For Master Kiara.”

“What?”

“She got to Evolve, fight a ferocious opponent, and die on the battlefield. That’s all the master ever wanted. I heard you were with her when she died, like a good granddaughter. I have to say...I’m jealous.”

Royce and Gaudartha nodded.

“I agree. Dying in bed never seemed like a fitting way for her to go.”

“If it weren’t for you, she would never Evolved, or had the chance to go out fighting.”

The Beast King patted Fran on the back.

“Hold your head high! You didn’t let her die. You gave her the most glorious death she could ask for! I’m sure Master Kiara is thanking you as we speak! As her number one student, I guarantee it!”

Rigdith seemed to think that Fran was still in shock from Kiara’s death. He was trying to cheer her up. Fran understood, and nodded to him.

“Hm...”

“Also,” he said, “a word of warning about Sword God Form. Don’t let the power get to you.”

“I know.”

“Good. Think of it as a signpost. That’s how I treat it, anyway.”

To Rigdith, Spear God Form was no mere Buff Skill. Rather, it was a sign that there was something greater than the King-Class Skills out there. We had come to a similar conclusion ourselves.

“Hm. I’ll catch up to my Sword God Form one day,” said Fran.

“Ha ha ha! That’s the spirit!” Rigdith laughed. “Let’s have another duel next time we meet.”

Finally, he made way for his daughter to speak.

“Fran...”

“Mea...”

They held each other’s hands, looking sad.

“This is goodbye...”

“Hm...”

They were both tearing up. I could see them welling up in Fran’s

eyes.

“Just give me a call if anything happens,” said Mea. “No matter where you are or what I’m doing...I’ll come flying.”

“I’ll do the same for you...”

“Excellent.”

“Hm.”

Fran and Mea nodded, in perfect sync with each other.

“Don’t cry,” said Mea, even though she was crying herself. “This isn’t the last time we’ll see each other.”

“Urgh...”

“Oh, what will I do with you?”

Mea wiped the tears gently from Fran’s face and let go of her hands. This was goodbye.

“The ship’s going to leave without you, Fran.”

The departure bell sounded, and Fran ran up the ramp. She didn’t give herself the chance to waver. The sooner she got on the ship, the better. Once she was on board, she and Mea looked at each other silently, then broke the silence together.

“Goodbye...!”

“Thank you...!”

Fran forced herself to smile. She didn’t want to say goodbye in tears, and the feeling was mutual. As awful as their smiles were, it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

Thanks, Mea, I said. For everything.

I should be thanking you. We’ll see each other again. I’ll show you what Lind can really do.

Looking forward to it.

“We shall meet again, Fran!”

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

This boat was called a speedboat for a reason. It pulled away from the harbor faster than any ship we’d ever been on, but Fran still kept waving until Grayseal was nothing but a speck in the distance.

“Bye-bye, everyone.”



Bonus Story: Beastgirl Flamia



Hm... I hear something.

Was it music...? Yes, I heard music, faintly.

Ah... I can't move.

As I stirred, I realized that I couldn't do much more than twitch. So wait, what happened to my body? Was I still a sword? Or was I human?

I had no idea, actually. I couldn't move my body, and my surroundings were sealed in perfect darkness. Where was I? Was I dreaming? Was this a dream? Then again, I couldn't sleep, so this couldn't possibly be a dream...

I searched my memories and finally remembered. That was right—I was being repaired by Alistaire.

Perhaps this really was something akin to sleeping. If I were still human, it might be something like having a lucid dream.



Suddenly, I realized the music was getting louder.

I wasn't sure how to describe it, at first. Very energetic and bright, kind of like the opening theme song of an anime for kids? It was really up-tempo, with the kind of melody that makes little kids want to jump up and dance.

Kemomimi girl Flamia ♪

Let's all sing together! ♪

Huh? What? Kemomimi girl? Wait, what is going on right now?

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪

Pretty kemomimi ♪ Lovely kemomimi ♪

Kemomimi cuteness will go to your heart ♪

Captivating kemomimi for everyone ♪

Wh-what is happening?

I had no idea where the music was coming from! Was it really an anime theme song? Maybe Kemomimi girls were like magical girls, or something? It sounded like a duet. A two-girl group? And I felt like I'd heard one of these voices before...

Wait, this voice sounds like Fran! That was why it was familiar. One of the singers was unmistakably Fran. But why was Fran singing this song? And couldn't I see anything? My surroundings had been entirely dark the whole time.

As soon as I thought that, though, a screen the size of a large computer monitor appeared in front of me.

Oh!

There! I could see them now!

The other girl was Mea!

Fran and Mea, dressed in frilly outfits, were dancing like idols while they sang! Fran's outfit was super cute. It was a sleeveless, pale blue dress with white accents, covered in frills.

Why, it looks just like the outfit she's wearing in the B2-sized tapestry available in stores now, with art by Llo-sensei!

Hm? What had I just said? I'd felt like I had to say it, in the moment. Perhaps the oracle (of the author) had visited me?

In contrast to Fran's blue and white, Mea's outfit was basic black and scarlet, cut in a more boyish style. She wore culottes instead of a skirt, and a tie around her neck. It suited her about as well as anything I could have imagined.

This kemomimi isn't just cute, you know? ♪
She listens for people's cries, ♪
She listens for cries for help. ♪
She kills bad guys with one deadly blow! ♪
She strikes them with black lightning! ♪

She crushes evil and spreads the truth. ♪
She strikes evil with a single blow. ♪
She wipes out all the bad guys! ♪
She kills all the villains! ♪

This is kind of cute, but also kind of disturbing...

The images playing out before me were a little disturbing, too. I saw Fran and Mea using magic and swords to defeat Shocker-like enemy troops. Fran was wearing the standard of the black lightning, running back and forth through the enemies, chopping their heads off one by one. Actually, the sword she was holding was me! So wait, what was I doing right here if she was holding me?

I supposed anything was possible in a dream. Except the details were awfully realistic for a dream. That blood looked pretty real to me...

Ugh, gross!

A single strike of Fran's black lightning made her enemies explode into millions of pieces. Their guts were hanging out. Sure, the song sounded like a magical girl theme, but their actions weren't appropriate for magical girls at all! Though I guess they *were* using magic...

Still, magical girls weren't like that!

We're the kemomimi girls~ ♪
Everyone will fall in love with our fluffy ears~ ♪
We're not just cute, though!
After all, cute little kitties still have claws!

Claws to kill bad guys~ ♪
Kemo ♪ kemo ♪ kemomimi girls ♪
We're here to protect your happiness~ ♪
We're fighting somewhere, even now ♪
Kemomimi girl Flamia~ ♪

The duet was back, and so was the idol-concert imagery. This *had* to be a dream, right? Which meant the images I was seeing were ones I'd unconsciously created myself? In other words, this was the kind of stuff I'm into? I really didn't want to believe that...

I'd thought it might be winding down, but it seemed to keep going. I was actually starting to enjoy myself.

We're kemono children ♪
Bad guys are all our prey ♪
Anyone and everyone is kemomimi girls ♪
The earthenware of Seto ♪
The origin and Seo ♪
Cat belly button and the belly button cat. ♪
You are all Kemono's prey! ♪

They've moved to a light rap interlude! They really did it this time!

Actually, it was pretty common for anime to incorporate have minor rap verses. This was the kind with weird and incomprehensible lyrics, but I kind of liked it? Fran's chanting made an interesting contrast with Mea's more up-tempo beats. When they said "you are all" together at the end, they did a kitty-cat pose. It was pretty great.

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪
Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪
Cute tails, charming tails ♪
We'll get your heart with our adorable tails ♪

We're sending you the charm of our tails ♪

They were onto the second verse. Some of the words had changed, as was common with second verses. This time, however, the dance included them pointing their booties at me and wagging their little tails. It was an unbelievably cute image!

I got the charm, girls! It's so good! Fran!!

My tail sensor is super sensitive ♪

It can find the embers of evil using the flame of justice in my heart ♪

We'll shine upon a peaceful world and protect it ♪

We're gonna destroy the bad guys with a single blow!

Burn them up with our white flame~ ♪

Rewarding good and punishing evil, scorching away the filth ♪

We'll eradicate all of the evil bad guys!

We'll massacre them until there's nothing left! ♪

Fran had been in the front for the first verse, but it was Mea who took the lead in the second, singing about the future. She was wreathed in a white and gold blaze of fire, spinning flashy circles around the stage. Fran's massacre had been pretty gross, but Mea's total incineration was pretty bad, too. Her enemies went from being completely on fire to blackened ash. That said, Mea's battle style of laughing merrily while she fought was pretty cute.

She couldn't beat Fran, though!

We're the kemomimi girls~ ♪ Our fluffy tails will make your heart feel cuddly ♪

You can nuzzle them if you want! Just you, as a special treat.

But if you cheat on us, we'll punish you!

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemomimi girls ♪

For everyone's happiness, we'll destroy evil today, too! ♪

Kemomimi Girl Flamia~ ♪

Wha?! Someone will be nuzzling Fran's kemomimi?!

I refuse! Fran's kitty ears and tail were not to be touched by anyone I disapproved of! He'd have to be stronger than me, rich, kind to everyone without discrimination, good-looking and not nasty at all, have good social standing, and always put Fran first. And after they got married, he'd have to allow Fran to continue her adventurer work. Also, it would be nice if he could perfectly maintain me. Anyone who didn't meet those criteria was a no!

Also, if he cheated, I would have to punish him as well after Fran had had her turn! I'd make him taste such hell that he'd wish for death!

Our tails are so fluffy and soft ♪

Anyone who touches them will be soothed ♪

We'll give you all gentle healing ♪

Would you like to touch my kemomimi? No, not there, it's too sensitive ♪

But I might be able to let you touch them someday.

Just...be gentle, all right?

Wh-?! Inexcusable! It's absolutely inexcusable! Her ears were already off limits...but her tail?! Looked like I really did have my work cut out for me.

Men! I may let you touch her ears, perhaps! But her tail is absolutely off limits!

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪

Kemo ♪ Kemo ♪ Kemokemo ♪

We'll behead you and exorcise you and destroy you ♪

Kemomimi girl Flamia~ ♪

Was the song over? Really, what was going on? And yet...what an

unspeakable feeling of fulfillment.

Wait, what was this image?

“Chapter One – Futari wa Flamia”

Oh, the episode was starting! I guess what I’d been watching so far really was the opening theme. But wait. Wasn’t this title...kind of bad? Wouldn’t it get flagged for copyright infringement? I mean, the masterpiece of magical girl media that is both pretty and curing... You know! That one!

While I was working out my issues with the subtitle of chapter one, Fran suddenly appeared on the screen.

“Oh no, I’m late. I gotta hurry.”

“Fran! You forgot your lunch!”

“Oh, that’s very important!”

“Here. You’re clumsy, so be sure to watch out for cars, okay?”

“Yeah. See you later.”

“Have a good day!”

Oh ho! She’s wearing a sailor uniform!

Apparently, the setting was a girls’ school. This scene showed Fran heading off to school. I guess the woman who’d just given Fran her lunch was her...mother? She looked like Fran, but a bit older, with a motherly vibe. Another member of the Black Cat tribe.

Was this supposed to be Earth? The house and the rest of the town certainly looked like it. There was asphalt and pavement, and it all looked a lot like Japan. Even the road signs were in Japanese.

As I watched Fran running from behind, I saw her pass humans, but also beast folk, elves, and dwarves, who all seem to be living in this world together. It was kind of weird to see dwarves all dressed up in formal clothes, honestly. Fran was using flying leaps and other acrobatic turns to make her way through the town to school. Though this looked like Japan, magical abilities and skills clearly existed in this world.

“Good morning, Fran-chan!”

“Morning, Fran.”

“Morning.”

“You’re not late today!”

“Good job!”

“Mm.”

Fran received friendly greetings from the kids who seemed to be her classmates, Satya and Fult. Her homeroom teacher, Amanda, got mad at her. This was unfolding like a pretty typical school story so far, but I supposed it *was* the first episode. It was just establishing the world at this point, probably.

But just as I was enjoying the soothing experience of watching Fran go to school in a nice, peaceful world, the situation suddenly changed.

On her way home, Fran ran into some kind of weird guy dressed all in skin-tight black. He was yelling something about world domination, like every mobster villain ever. He started chasing all the kids around the public park, threatening to kidnap them.

You know, I’ve always wondered... The enemies in tokusatsu and anime and what-have-you are always trying to kidnap little children. How do they expect that kind of minor terrorism to help them take over the world? Maybe there’d been stuff with plots that moved beyond such kid’s stuff, recently. Stuff where the villains are actually a little eviler?

While I was wondering about that, Fran sprang into action. She hid in a secret area and reached her hand into her school bag. The bag seemed to be an item box, actually, because the sword she pulled from it was far too long to be contained within.

It was me. Oh, man... I knew this was a dream, but it was a pretty weird feeling to see another version of myself.

“Master, the Reidos Group has appeared. Please lend me your power.”

“Of course! Leave it to me!”

“Haaaaa! Transform!”

Black lightning surrounded Fran’s body the moment she shouted that. It was an amazing visual, but I couldn’t let myself get carried away. Her sailor uniform unwound itself and disappeared; the black

lightning covered her important parts, but she still looked pretty sexy. This was a pretty typical template for a magical girl transformation scene, but I didn't think *this* production would go that route! Fran was still too young to be sexy! I was going to complain to the producers!

Oh wait... This is a dream, isn't it? Does that mean that *I'm* the producer? What am I doing?! It should be a cuter transformation, shouldn't it? I understand that it's important to make sure our older friends are interested in the program, and that's why they need sexy scenes, but... You can't use Fran that way!

While I was in the middle of getting mad at myself, the black lightning disappeared, and Fran appeared with the white and blue outfit on. She raised me to her forehead and took a sharp pose.

"Kemomimi Girl Fran, on stage!"

"Also Kemomimi Girl Mea! Arriving unannounced!"

"We are Flamia!"

Apparently, Mea had shown up at some point. They posed back-to-back with one another, exchanging a glance. It seemed they were already friends.

But, uh... You know, their lines were kind of a problem. *This isn't really gonna fall into the purview of homage, I don't think.*

Plus, after all that, the fight was basically over in an instant. I mean, the enemy they were facing was just a black-tights-wearing enemy soldier, not a cyborg or a monster or anything. *Hey, production team! Why'd you put so much time and money into the erotic scene and not into this?! There's so many other places to focus your budget!*

"It's been a week since I met my master."

Oh! It looked like we'd suddenly entered a flashback. I guess it was time to see how Fran met me.

The scene changed. Fran appeared, running in some kind of forest. She was being pursued by the black-tights-wearing guys, but it looked like she hadn't transformed into a Kemomimi girl yet, and so didn't have the power to fight back.

She was about to be caught by the guys in the black tights! Just then, a strange light began to shine in front of her.

"This is... a sword?"

“Do you seek power? Then take me.”

“...? I hear a voice coming from somewhere.”

“Um, I was just talking, actually...”

“Is someone here? Where?”

“Uh... Um... This is the sword in front of you speaking...”

Heh. My first appearance was a comical scene, huh? Well, I was playing the transformation item this time, so... I guess in a world where Fran was the protagonist, that was the role I got to have.

I mean, I was ultimately a super cool, great and fashionable guy, so I supposed it was fine if they have to make my character kind of lame in the show.

The conversation between Fran and myself continued on the screen. I told her I'd come from a magical world to find the person who would wield me, but run out of power and ended up stuck in the ground. That was where I was when Fran ran up to me.

“So, if I make a contract with you...”

“Yes. You will become able to use magic.”

“Do you think I could win against them?”

“Of course. So, Fran! Please form a contract with me and become a Kemomimi girl!”

Wait just a second! That line was no good! That was just the super-famous “make a contract with me and become a magical girl” line from you-know-what! Wait, was I that nasty incubator character in this world? Was I gonna end up eating Fran someday? Ah! No, stop, Fran! If you make a contract with him, someday bad things are going to happen!

“From now on, you're not just Fran! You're Kemomimi Girl Fran!”

“Mm!”

Time for the episode to end, huh?

A version of the opening theme played as a now-transformed Fran cut down all the black-clad guys in front of me. *It's becoming pretty common lately to use a special arrangement of the opening theme at the end of the first episode. I wonder what the ending theme sounds like... Now I'm*

really curious.

“Fran’s in a real bind. But what should appear before her but the second Kemomimi Girl?! In this moment of danger, how will Fran know if the girl in front of her is a friend or foe? Episode Two: The Black and Red Kemomimi! Come and nuzzle us next week!”

Fran sounded super pumped up as she delivered her lines for the next episode preview. I was guessing the second episode was going to be all about how she met Mea.

How am I gonna get to see the next episode? I’m really curious now!

But, as if denying me my wish, my dark surroundings started to flood with white light. This was definitely a sign I was waking up from the dream. Were my repairs done? Come on, please wait for just a moment!

Just another half-hour, that’s all I need! Let me see episode two!

Ahhhh!! My consciousness was beginning to fade...



EXTRA CHAPTER
Fran Plays Volleyball
STORY: Yuu Tanaka
ART: Tomowo Maruyama

HEH
HEH!

FRAN
AND
JET
VER-
SUS...

I THOUGHT
WE COULD
PLAY BEACH
VOLLEYBALL
WITH IT.

WE
BOUGHT
A BALL.



IN
HIND-
SIGHT
...

I SHOULD
HAVE
TOLD
HER NOT
TO USE
SPELLS.



「SONIC
SHOT」
!!

「WIND
MAGIC」
!!

WHAP
!!

URKI!



TWO
DOPPEL-
GANG-
ERS OF
MYSELF.





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